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JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AS A DRAMATIST

by

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JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AS A DRAMATIST

Outline and Table of Contents

SECTION I

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

THE IRISH DRAMATIC MOVEMENT

Prior to the decade 1885 to 1895, the literature of Ireland had not yet become national. Theretofore it had been a part of the writing of England. During those ten years a group of writers of some distinction realized that Ireland must have her own literature, even though it was written in English rather than in Gaelic, the national Irish language, and that this literature must be entirely apart in content and purpose from that of England. It must be Irish; it must be founded on Irish legends and folk tales; and the English language must be adapted to fit Irish phraseology and ways of thinking. Men of high rank in literary circles became interested in this movement and soon began writing Irish things for Ireland. In 1892 the Irish National Literary Society was founded, and a little more than ten years later, the need of an outlet for dramatic expression was felt which brought into existence the Irish National Theatre Society.

At this time, many literary associations were springing up in Ireland. There was besides the Irish National Literary Society and the Irish National Theatre Society a group calling themselves the Irish Literary Theatre. Mr. Ernest A. Boyd offers the following explanation that,

> the main purpose of these societies was to foster the new growth of Irish literature by means of lectures on Celtic subjects and by the publication of the works of writers hitherto neglected, as well as of the younger men who were beginning to make themselves heard.[1]

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[1]Ernest A. Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance, New York, John Luce Company, 1910, pp. 87-88.

~~and~~ Miss Cohen and Mr. Whitman state the object of the Celtic revival in the following terms, "The object of the Celtic Renaissance in 1890 was to lift into literature the songs, myths, romances, and legends treasured for countless generations in the hearts of the Irish peasantry."[2] And, ". . . to develop a distinctive Irish culture, revive the old Irish langugage, to restore the ancient legends of the land to their rightful place in the literature of the day."[3] Movements of this sort were going on all over Europe at this time. The need for change, especially in the field of drama,was felt through the influence of Ibsen's work. A few years earlier there had been a movement in London which was known as the Independent Theatre of London. This theatre was organized as a place where noncommercial and literary drama could be produced. The Irish National Theatre was founded with the same object in mind, but it was soon discovered that its potentialities were far greater than had been those of the Independent Theatre of London. The productions of this theatre were

> . . . the beginning of a movement that not only created a native drama in Ireland, but afterwards stimulated both Scotland and Wales to follow our example. It gave to the Gael that which had never before existed in the history of the race--a means of expressing the national consciousness through the medium of drama.[4]

There is a general belief that the Irish National Theatre was an outgrowth of the Irish National Theatre Society, but this is not true, as Mr. W. G. Fay and his brother, Frank, were almost entirely responsible for the begin-

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[2]Helen Louise Cohen, One Act Plays By Modern Authors, New York, Harcourt Brace Company, 1921, p. xxvi.

[3]C. H. Whitman, Representative Modern Dramas, New York, Macmillan Company, 1936, p. 771.

[4]W. G. Fay and Mrs. C. M. Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, London, Richard Cowan, 1935, p. 121.

ning of the Irish Literary Theatre, and they were not connected with the other movement at all. The Fay brothers were producers who had become interested in what was going on in the dramatic world and started this theatre group as a place in which they might carry out and test their ideas. Their first season, although rather a successful experiment, was nothing in comparison to the second, for, by the end of it, the powers of the theatre were beginning to be felt throughout the country. It was at this time Lady Gregory, Yeats, and shortly afterwards, John Millington Synge became vitally interested in Irish drama.

William Butler Yeats, a poet in his own right, felt that the change to the modern way of writing came when Parnell fell from power in 1891.[5] He thought the establishment of a national theatre to be of the utmost importance to the future of literature, and he said,

> I would not be trying to form an Irish National Theatre if I did not believe that there existed in Ireland, whether in the minds of a few people or of a great number I do not know, an energy of thought about life itself, a vivid sensitiveness as to the reality of things, powerful enough to overcome all those phantoms of the night.[6]

Naturally the experiments of this theatre had to be few and not at all elaborate as there was very little money, and the productions had to be rehearsed and written at the leisure of both actors and authors. However, the plays which were put on before audiences proved successful beyond the wildest hopes of the producers, even though at times things were discourag-

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[5]William Butler Yeats, Dramatis Personae, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1936, p. 186.

[6]William Butler Yeats, Plays and Controversies, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1924, p. 95.

ing when the plays did not quite come up to expectation.

> . . . we have so much to prove and to disprove, we are ready to forget that the creation of an emotion of beauty is the only kind of literature that justifies itself. Books of literary propaganda and literary history are merely preparations for creation or understanding of such an emotion.[7]

But the theatre flourished nonetheless. Fay commented:

> Looking back at it all, I can hardly believe how quickly events marched in 1903. . . . We had begun in a dire poverty that made us the laughing-stocks of Dublin. . . . Yet within six months of our beggardly beginnings we had performed in London and had been acclaimed as masters and pioneers in our art by all the most eminent critics.[8]

Yeats was on a constant lookout for new plays or new authors, and while in Paris on a trip, he was introduced to John Millington Synge, an unknown young man, who at this time was working as a musician and literary critic. This individual, although he seemed to be doing only the most mediocre work, impressed Yeats as a person who would be able to bring to the Irish theatre just what it needed. He advised the young author to go to the Aran Islands, study the people, and then try to put them into a vitalized drama. Synge, who was merely drifting at the time and not at all satisfied with his work, decided to give the idea a try, and left Paris almost immediately. Thus Yeats discovered the outstanding figure of the modern Irish theatre.

> In J. M. Synge the impulse of the revival met with the response of genius. It did not create him as it has done others, but it discovered in him that spark of originality

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[7]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 28.

[8]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 136.

which eventually burst into the flames of brilliant imagination.[9]

Francis J. Bickley thinks that the development of this theatre

> . . . may be called, very roughly, the substituion of the spirit of Synge for the spirit of Ibsen. Very naturally the men who started the theatre had him who single-handed had created a national drama for Norway constantly in their minds. . . . But Synge considered Ibsen's "joyless and pallid words" "as fashioned as the pharmacopeia of Calen." That Synge altered the tone of the theatre it would be hardy to assert; but it must be remembered, not only that he was the strongest man connected with it, but also that he had a voice in the selection of plays for performance.[10]

As was to be expected, there was a great deal of criticism about the way in which Synge presented the people of his own country in his plays, but, in order to create a living drama which would not become dated, he had to show these peasants as he saw and stylized them rather than as the Irish wished to be shown.

> It might be said of him at the very start of the Irish Theatre he brought us a way of looking at life that belongs to the Celtic tradition. His plays were denounced as being alien to Irish life and the Irish mind. Those who denounced them in these terms were wrong, and they were wrong because they knew nothing about the Gaelic tradition as it has been expressed in poetry.[11]

> Synge alone has written of the peasant as he is to all ages; of the folk-imagination as it has been shaped by centuries of life among fields or on fishing-grounds. His people talk a highly-coloured musical language, and one never hears from them a thought that is of to-day and not of yesterday. . . . The people they (the writers for the Abbey Theatre) write of, too, are not the true folk. They are the peasant as he is being transformed by modern life, and for that very reason the man of the towns may find it easier to understand. There is less surprise, less wonder

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[9]Boyd, Ireland's Literary Renaissance, pp. 334-35.

[10]Francis J. Bickley, J. M. Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912, p. 73-74.

[11]Daniel Corkery, Synge and the Anglo-Irish Literature, A Study, Dublin, Cork University Press, 1931, p. 47.

in what he sees, but there is more of himself there, more of his vision of the world and of the problems that are troubling him.[12]

The principles for which Lady Gregory, Synge, Yeats, and the Fays had so fought for, were worthwhile. Their ideals were not mere dreams, and the goal which they set for themselves was not unobtainable. The National Irish Theatre and native drama for Ireland became a reality. Yeats expressed this beautifully when he said,

> We have been the first to create a true "People's Theatre", and we have succeeded because it is not an exploitation of local colour, or of a limited form of drama possessing a temporary novelty, but the first doing of something for which the world is ripe, something that will be done all over the world and done more perfectly: the making articulate of all the dumb classes each with its own knowledge of the world, its own dignity, but all objective with an objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics.[13]
>
> It is a supreme moment in the life of a nation when it is able to turn now and again from its preoccupations, to delight in the capricious power of the artist as one delights in the movement of some wild creature, but nobody can tell with certainty when that moment is at hand.[14]

Already the drama of Ireland had gone through two preliminary stages in its development and the dramatists who were to play the principal parts in its further growth had served their apprenticeships, when Yeats' The King's Threshold was performed one night in Dublin. Mr. Fay makes the following comment upon the performance

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[12] Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 141.

[13] Ibid., p. 206.

[14] Ibid., p. 43.

> . . . the production of The King's Threshold is chiefly memorable as the occasion that brought over to Dublin the lady whose subsequent interest in our little Society made it possible for an Irish theatre to be established in Dublin on a permanent basis in a home of its own.[15]

Soon after that, Miss Horniman endowed the Abbey Theatre.

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[15]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 143.

CHAPTER II

THE ABBEY THEATRE

So many people were confused in the beginning about the founding of the Abbey Theatre that Mr. Fay, its very capable manager, came out with the following statement:

> I find that most people think of the Abbey Theatre as part and parcel of a national, or rather nationalist movement, that found literary expression in the work of men like W. B. Yeats and "AE" and was represented in politics by Sinn Fein. They are apt to confuse it with the Irish Literary Theatre, which was dead and buried before the Abbey Theatre had been conceived, much less born.[1]
>
> The Abbey Theatre was first and foremost a theatrical, not a literary movement. It was the creation not of letters but of actors.[2]

Miss Annie E. F. Horniman was an impetuous person. After she saw her first performance given by the Fay Brothers' Company, she wanted to help them out and do what she could towards making this venture a success. Miss Horniman was not an actress, nor was she able to write plays, but she soon found herself making some badly needed costumes for the theatre. One day, as she was leaving a rehearsal to which she had just brought another set of costumes she had made from designs supplied to her by the author of the play, she turned to Mr. Fay and said,

> "I have had some spare money by me lately, and I have been advised to put it into Hudson Bay shares. If by any chance they

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[1]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 103.

[2]Ibid., p. 106.

do anything exciting, I shall have enough money to buy the society a little theatre in Dublin. In the meantime keep on working hard.[3]

Excitement was rampant. Things were really breaking for the Company now. Mr. Fay goes on with the comment,

"We were nearly crazy with excitement at the prospect of having a little theatre of our own, when, to put a feather in our hat, the London Irish Literary Society again invited us to London. . . . It was to be a real West End theatre . . .[4]

this time. Once before they had been to London, but not at one of the big houses. Since the first success of this group the fondest dream of the actors and playwrights of the Company had been, of course, to have a theatre of its own, but these people realized even though there was a very definite need for what they were doing, it was an ambition which was a long way from realization. When Miss Horniman offered to endow a theatre, they were overwhelmed. The Society had had great difficulties up to this time in finding suitable places in which to give their performances. For a nominal sum per year the players had rented a small place in which to rehearse and present their productions, but their audiences were forced to sit on wooden planks stretched across horses which became unendurably hard during the course of an evening. A little later they obtained a somewhat more comfortable location from the point of view of the patrons, but it was so expensive, they still had to rehearse in the old place. This was far from a satisfactory arrangement as it involved moving scenery, props, and costumes for each performance. This was one of the main reasons the Abbey writers began to create streamlined dramas with the least possible number of scene changes and the fewest

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[3]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 152.

[4]Ibid., p. 156.

props consistent with an intelligible production.

Many problems presented themselves even after Miss Horniman bought and gave them the old Mechanic's Institute Theatre. There was the question of a patent for the new theatre because, without this legal document, no plays could be put on. Irish laws regarding this were very strict, but

> In August, in spite of the strenuous opposition of the existing patent theatres, a patent for a new theatre was granted. As Miss Horniman was not a resident in Ireland and was therefore ineligible as a patentee, it was made out in the name of Lady Gregory.[5]

This license stated exactly what the company was to be allowed to produce and under what circumstances.

> "Dame Augustus Gregory" as Patentee was "enjoined and commanded to gather, entertain, govern, privilege, and keep such and so many players" and not to put on the stage any "exhibition of wild beasts or dangerous performances or to allow women or children to be hung from the flies or fixed positions from which they cannot release themselves". "It being our Royal will and pleasure that for the future our said theatre may be instrumental to the promotion of virtue and instructions of human life."[6]

Finally, when all the numerous difficulties were ironed out, the remodeling began in earnest, and

> Work at the theatre went on quickly and smoothly, and by December all was ready. . . . It was now called the Abbey Theatre, a name that has become famous throughout the civilized world. . . . It was destined to be the parent of over six hundred little theatres all over the United States. On December 27, 1904, the curtain was run up for the first time.[7]

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[5]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 158.

[6]Lady Augustus Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, New York and London, The Knickerbocker Press: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1913, p. 42.

[7]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, pp. 162-63.

For the first two years as the Abbey Players the Company stuck to peasant comedy and tragedy, and tried to perfect themselves in this field before branching out into others.[8] This was such a successful vehicle for them, they did it more and more as time went on instead of trying other types. As a medium, it was so well suited to the ability of both the actors and dramatists it seemed unwise to change. Circulars which read as follows were sent to the prospective authors in order that they would have an idea of more or less what type of material was wanted.

> A play to be suitable for performance at the Abbey should contain some criticism of life, founded on the experience or personal observation of the writer, or some vision of life or Irish life by preference, important from its beauty or from some excellence of style, and this intellectual quality is not more necessary to tragedy than to the gayest comedy.[9]

The people who became the players for the Abbey Theatre were not professional actors and actresses. They were everyday people who were interested in the stage. This is one reason the policy of the Company was to perfect themselves on the peasant plays first before they tried other types of parts because the players were just receiving their training.

> As we wish our work to be full of this country, our stage-manager has almost always to train our actors from the beginning, always so in the case of peasant plays, and this makes the building up of a theatre like ours the work of years. We are now fairly satisfied with the representation of peasant life, and we can afford to give the greater part of our attention to other expressions of our art and of our life.[10]

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[8]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 189.

[9]Lady Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, p. 101.

[10]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 190.

Yeats felt that to have people acting on the stage in the evening who had regular jobs doing utterly different things in the day time was a distinct advantage because

> An artisan or a small shopkeeper feels, I think, when he has seen upon our Abbey stage men of his own trade, that they are represented as he himself would represent them if he had the gift of expression.[11]

Language was a difficulty which confronted the managers at the Abbey. Naturally the dialect of the peasants was not completely familiar to all of the writers. John Synge had gone to the Aran Islands in the summers and he spent a great deal of his time in listening to the brogue of these primitive people. He told in his introduction to The Playboy Of The Western World, about listening through the cracks and crannies to the colloquialisms.

> When I was writing IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen. This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the langugage they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form.[12]

Synge added an underlying rhythm all his own to the speech of these peasants as he heard it, and created something individual. He has been criticized for having to listen at the cracks and not knowing the dialetic differences first hand. Maurice Bourgeois felt,

> The fact is that, when Synge declares that he was obliged to listen to the speech of the people through a chink in the floor, he implicitly condemns himself; a real peasant-playwright

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[11] Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 202.

[12] J. M. Synge, The Playboy of the Western World, Boston, John W. Luce Company, 1911, p. vi.

> such as the Abbey Theatre is bound to produce some day, would not have to hunt for local colour; he would have the peasant speech in himself, and know how to use it. . . . The concept of rhythm, which holds so important a place in latter-day philosophy and aesthetics, underlies Synge's whole view of drama, his technical execution, and, more especially, his literary use of the Irish patois.[13]

After the Fay brothers left the Abbey Theatre, Lady Gregory, Yeats and Synge were left in complete charge of the Company. Synge had the particular duty of reading and deciding which plays were to be produced or rejected. The plays which were staged at the Abbey were easily available to the public as one of the policies which Yeats strongly advocated was the publication of the manuscripts. He said, "As we do not think a play can be worth acting and not worth reading, all our plays will be published in time."[14] Synge was intimately and vitally connected with the Abbey Theatre from the time Yeats discovered him in that small hotel room in Paris until his death in 1909. It gave him a new interest in life; it gave him the necessary courage to face those last few years with fortitude.

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[13] Maurice Bourgeois, John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre, London, Constable and Company, Ltd., 1913, p. 229.

[14] Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 27.

SECTION II

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

CHAPTER III

BIOGRAPHY

April 16, 1871 - March 24, 1909

Shortly after John Millington Synge celebrated his first birthday in 1872, his father, John Hatch Synge,died. This left Mrs. Synge, still a young woman, with a large family of children to look after. Her first act was to move from Newtown Little near Rathfarnham which is in the outer suburbs of Dublin to Orwell Park, Rothgar, in the inner suburbs. Synge's father had been a barrister, but also derived part of his income from some property which he had inherited in County Galway. The rent from this land, together with some other investments gave the family sufficient income on which to live in some degree of comfort.

Synge was never a strong boy. He was frail during his childhood, and was in ill health most of his adult life. This made him stay off to himself as any handicap is apt to make a person do.

> He was one of a large family, left, one thinks, much to himself, not robust enough to join in the usual games--and how much that means in the development of a boy's character --driven in upon himself, finding solace in nature and the wild,--companionship that does not betray. . . . He was emotional, instinct-led; and sought affection not from his intellectual equals, but from others like himself, hearts fundamentally simple.[1]

At twenty-one he graduated from the University of Dublin and then began his three years of wandering over the continent of Europe with his violin under his arm, studying music in Germany for a while; afterwards going to Paris

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[1]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, A Study, p. 55.

where he decided to become a critic of French literature, rather than a slightly below average musician. This was at the time when Yeats discovered him in 1898 and advised in those now famous words,

> Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.[2]

This advice changed the entire future of his career. After careful consideration, he decided to give it a try. Synge returned to his native Ireland, wandered through Kerry, Wicklow, and Connemara, and then settled on the Aran Islands to study this most primitive of all Irish civilization. Here, he gathered a rich store of folk lore and idioms out of which fund he created some forty characters. Barrett Clark felt as a result of this that "Synge was by all odds the greatest of the dramatists who wrote for the Irish Theatre."[3] The people of the Islands did not wholly appreciate or understand Synge and they were, at times, somewhat puzzled by his actions as the following passage indicates. "He was an unassertive, unassuming man, with a genius for being inconspicuous. He told us that his usual method in a poor man's cabin was to make them forget that he was there."[4] They all cherished the most kindly memories of this dramatist. A few of these people have immigrated to America since Synge died. Edward J. O'Brien said in an introduction he wrote to one of the Synge editions that these friends Mr. Synge made while

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[2]William Butler Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, New York, Macmillan Company, 1912, p. 37.

[3]B. H. Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama, New York, Appleton Century Company, 1925, p. 336

[4]John Masefield, John M. Synge: A Few Personal Recollections With Biographical Notes, New York, Macmillan Company, 1915, p. 180.

on the Aran Islands had memories which they

> . . . treasured up of his presence among them and the quality of his personal magnetism.[5] One and all they agree that John Synge has reflected faithfully and sympathetically the life he saw, . . . and the dramatist was keen enough to discard such stories as might have been told him in an irresponsible mood.[6]

Personally Synge was rather a retiring fellow. He was only five feet eight or nine inches tall, had a big frame with a thick set neck, but was never a man who gave the appearance of being strong or healthy. His head was large with a shock of reddish brown hair. A swarthy, care-lined face gave one the impression of his being a good deal older than he really was, and even though he had a will of iron, the pain which gnawed at him during the last six or seven years of his life was plainly visible in his expression. Instead of being clean-shaven, he affected a bushy moustache along with an absurdly small tuft of hair on his chin which might have been called a goatee except for its diminutive size. The square set of his jaw, together with a hoarse voice and clear, hazel-grey eyes completed and itensified the gravity of his expression.

Synge loved to talk to people, or rather to have people talk to him, for he preferred rather to sit by the hour and listen to others discuss things of interest to themselves than to join in the conversation. If possible he withdrew a little, and sat still enough so as to be entirely forgotten. In this way, he formulated characters and assimilated his material. When he talked with women, his conversation is said to have taken on a lightness and charm which was not present when men were a part of the group.

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[5]John Millington Synge, The Aran Islands, Boston, John W. Luce Company, 1911, Edward J. O'Brien ed., p. x.

[6]Ibid., p. xii.

Masefield used a charming phrase when he described Synge's intense interest in listening to others talk when he said, "he liked to know the colours of people's minds."[7]

Although ill a great deal, John Synge was even tempered and patient most of the time. Masefield said of him, "I never saw him angry. I never saw him vexed. I never heard him utter a hasty or unkind word."[8] and one of his friends remarked that, "There was something very nice about Synge . . . though the plays are cynical, he was not cynical himself."[9]

Politics never played a very large part in his life. Yeats referred to this lack of political interest twice.

> . . . He was the man that we needed, because he was the only man I have ever known incapable of a political thought or of a humanitarian purpose.[10]

> Synge seemd by nature unfitted to think a political thought and with the exception of one sentence, spoken when I first met him in Paris, that implied some sort of nationalist conviction, I cannot remember that he spoke of politics or showed any interest in men in the mass, or any subject that is studied through abstractions and statistics.[11]

He was interested in things in nature, was a good story teller, and frequently repeated anecdotes he had heard in out of the way places which were often ironical, but full of a sparkling vitality. Above all, the varied reactions of people to things interested him.

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[7]Masefield, John M. Synge, A Few Personal Recollections, p. 166.

[8]Ibid., p. 173.

[9]Ibid., p. 169.

[10]Yeats, Dramatis Personae, p. 195.

[11]Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 159.

The Abbey Theatre gave life a new meaning for Synge. He devoted himself to it entirely for seven years. During this period of his life, the fine qualities of his genius were brought out. Everything else was subordinated to his desire to create something worthwhile for this project. He felt "it should be a sweet thing to have what is best and richest," even "if it's for a short space only."[12]

Synge realized long before his operations he was going to die young. This insight is shown clearly in a couple of his poems as well as in his plays. ON AN ANNIVERSARY reflects his knowledge of how soon he was to pass away, especially in the last two lines.

ON AN ANNIVERSARY

With Fifteen-ninety or Sixteen-sixteen
We end Cervantes, Marot, Nashe or Green:
Then Sixteen-thirteen till two score and nine,
Is Crashaw's niche, that honey-lipped divine.
And so when all my little work is done
They'll say I came in Eighteen-seventy-one,
And died in Dublin. . . . What year will they write
For my poor passage to the stall of night?[13]

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[12] John Millington Synge, The Complete Works of John M. Synge, New York, Random House, 1935, p. 230.

[13] Ibid., p. 286.

Also,

A QUESTION

I asked if I got sick and died, would you
With my black funeral go walking too,
If you'd stand close to hear them talk or pray
While I'm let down in that steep bank of clay.
And, No, you said, for if you saw a crew
Of living idiots pressing round that new
Oak coffin--they alive, I dead beneath
That board--you'd rave and rend them with your teeth.[14]

The above poem as well as the last stanza of the following one show, not only his feeling of the rapidity of approaching death, but also the morbidity and cynicism which is reflected in so much of his work.

TO THE OAKS OF GLENCREE

My arms are around you, and I lean
Against you, while the lark
Sings over us, and golden lights, and green
Shadows are on your bark.

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[14] Synge, The Complete Works of John M. Synge, p. 288.

There'll come a season when you'll stretch

Black boards to cover me:

Then in Mount Jerome I will lie, poor wretch

With worms eternally.[15]

The feeling of passing on to another life which is reflected in almost every one of his few poems seemed to be constantly uppermost in Synge's mind.

He was working on DEIRDRE while he was dying but did not live long enough to complete it. Cornelius Weygandt commented upon it with the following thought.

> Synge wrote the play of her triumph over death as he himself was dying, and he wrote it with high heart, and, what is higher, gladness, despite his foreknowledge of his doom . . . he could not keep out of his writing, had he wished to keep it out, his own love that death was so soon to end, and the thoughts of what was the worth of life.[16]

Some time before his last illness he became engaged to one of the players at the Abbey. Most of what he wrote of his DEIRDRE was done after he was confined to his bed. Molly tried to encourage him to finish the play and often she would act out what he had written for him in order that he might see how the dialogue went. He did so want to finish it.

Just before he went to the hospital, Synge stopped at the home of the Stephen McKennas. They were about his closest friends, and after a short visit he rose and said good-bye to them, adding, "You'll never see me again."[17]

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[15] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 287.

[16] Ibid., p. 169.

[17] Yeats, Dramatis Personae, p. 137.

He was operated on shortly afterwards, but it was much too late to do any good. After a long talk with his doctors, he learned it was Cancer, and that there was no hope for him. The next day he told his brother-in-law quite cheerfully his time had come. Synge seemed worried that his fiancée would be crushed by his death and told her to be brave. He also explained to her how he wanted his works edited, and gave her some final instructions in this matter. As he was dying, he looked up at his nurse and said, "It is no use fighting death any longer," and then passed away quietly. The Matron of the hospital said of him, when asked if he knew the hopelessness of his case, "He may have known it for weeks, but he would not have said so to anyone. He would have no fuss. He was like that. . . . We were devoted to him."[18]

Yeats paid him the following tribute in his book, THE CUTTING OF THE AGATE, in summing up his character,

> He was a solitary undemonstrative man, never asking pity, nor complaining, nor seeking sympathy but in this books momentary cries: all folded up in brooding intellect, knowing nothing of new books and newspapers, reading the great masters alone; and he was more hated because he gave his country what it needed, an unmoved mind where there is a perpetual last day, a trumpeting, and coming up to judgment.[19]

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[18]Yeats, Dramatis Personae, p. 134.

[19]Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 145.

CHAPTER IV

THE INFLUENCE OF SYNGE'S LIFE UPON HIS WORK

The factors which determined Synge's genius were largely directly influenced by the circumstances of his life. Had he led a completely normal childhood and been in good health the rest of the time, he undoubtedly would never have had either the ability or desire to create a masterpiece such as his RIDER'S TO THE SEA. The play would have been beyond the scope of his power. Yeats felt also that

> If Synge had married young or taken some profession, I doubt if he would have written books or been greatly interested in a movement like ours; (Abbey Theatre) but he refused various opportunities of making money in what must have been an almost unconscious preparation.[1]

A person who is unable to take part in normal activities, as he was due to his fraility, is bound to turn to some latent talent and develop it to such an extent as to make it a compensation for what is lost in other ways.

Outdoors was always a solace to him in his youth. He turned to the animals and tiny plants of the field when left out of the games which were too strenuous for him to participate in, and in this way things of the sea, the country, and nature took on a hidden meaning for him which would never be obvious to the completely strong, robust person. Just as these pastimes were paramount to him in his youth, so literature and music became of the utmost importance to him later on. While Synge was in College he studied Music Appreciation and learned to play on the violin. Already he had de-

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[1]Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 175

veloped a love of French literature. After graduation he set out for the Continent and traveled extensively throughout Germany and France. He wrote of his wanderings in several short pieces and they are also reflected to some extent in a few of his poems, but

> There is no humor in these verses and travel sketches. . . . We get the man himself, I say, a man exulting in primitiveness, in wilderness, in beauty of woman and child, in beauty of landscape; but exulting, more than in all else, in his own moods aroused by these things that he loved.[2]

When John Synge returned to Ireland, more especially to the Aran Islands, he took with him a new and utterly different viewpoint. He was not thoroughly Irish in his outlook.

> Unlike so many of his Irish contemporaries, he brought to the study of local conditions a mind well stored with foreign impressions, familiar with European culture, yet fundamentally colored by national traditions which his knowledge of Gaelic had preserved intact.[3]

Synge was able to see things with a clarity and farness of vision which was impossible for the average Irish author. His life had made him conscious of all the thousand and one things going on in the world of which the everyday person is totally unaware. He had also read widely in French as well as in English literature, and some of his work shows a direct influence of people like Racine, Loti, and Anatole France. Certain similarities between Pierre Loti's PÊCHEUR D'ISLANDE and RIDER'S TO THE SEA are evident, and "Synge's point of view in comedy is almost identical with that of Anatole

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[2]Cornelius Weygandt, Irish Plays and Playwrights, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913, p. 187.

[3]Ernest A. Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1917, p. 91.

France."[4]

Mr. Sherman feels

> It is an essential error to imagine that when Synge passed from the Latin Quarter to the Aran Islands he was returning to his own people. He never desired to return to his own people. He went back to this group of islands, and then to the most remote and backward of them, because he wished to escape into a perfectly strange and virgin environment.[5]

The Aran Islands gave him a place in which to think out problems of life which were uppermost in his mind. Humor could not enter his work. He knew and faced the grim reality of life. After Synge had lived on the Aran Islands and become thoroughly acquainted with the people, he realized how little time these native fisherfolk had for humor. Their lives were barren tragedies; tragedies as barren as the island itself. How could these people whose very existence was built upon the instability of the sea have strength of will enough left to enjoy any kind of pleasure?

> This life which he describes . . . as the most primitive in all Europe, satisfied some necessity of his nature. . . . Here were men and women who under the weight of their necessity lived, as the artist lived, in the presence of death and childhood, and the great affections and the orgiastic moment when life out leaps its limits, and who, as it is always with those who have refused or escaped the trivial and temporary, had dignity and good manners where manners mattered.[6]

He knew his own life would be cut off soon, and he was completely aware of the tragedy of his existence. Although he was engaged to be married, down underneath, this man realized how little happiness he might expect, with his death so inevitably just around the corner. His presentation of the DEIRDRE

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[4]Stuart Pratt Sherman, On Contemporary Literature, New York, Henry Holt Company, 1917, p. 196.

[5]Ibid., p. 202.

[6]Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 168.

story reflects, to some extent, his own emotional reaction to this problem and RIDER'S TO THE SEA is an almost perfect tragedy because it shows the beliefs and most minute observations of its author. THE WELL OF THE SAINTS is a great tragedy for the same reason. It proves how horrible it is to be disillusioned and have a complete satisfactorily compact world which it has taken a whole lifetime to build, suddenly crash down by one small act or word, and the realization that this protective wall which has been constructed, only to crumble, may never be rebuilt. Without some personal experience, Synge could not have written with such feeling as he was able to put into these two plays. "He was a drifting, silent man full of hidden passion, and loved wild islands, because there, set out in the light of day, he saw what lay hidden in himself."[7]

A majority of the characters he created were taken directly from life. In wandering around the Aran Islands, Synge told in his sketch of that name, about meeting tinkers and tramps as well as innumerable other types of people which recur in his plays, yet these figures become individuals after Synge has enriched them through his imaginative powers. The "joy of life for Synge was the transfiguring power of the primitive and etherial man."[8] He knew, and thoroughly understood these fisherfolk he wrote about, and Mr. Fay thinks that perhaps "One thing that made Synge's plays difficult for a Dublin audience was that he actually knew the people he was writing about, whereas they only thought they did.[9]

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[7]Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 176.

[8]Harold Williams, Modern English Writers, London, Sidgwick Limited, 1919, p. 210.

[9]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 220.

Synge lived with these peasants for months at a time, and after such intimate contact with them, he was bound to know exactly how they thought, and reacted to any given condition. He would never have consciously hurt anyone through his writings.

The PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD controversy was exceedingly painful to him. "He was much shaken by the PLAYBOY riot; on the first night confused and excited, knowing not what to do, and ill before many days, but it made no difference in his work."[10] Except in the PLAYBOY discussion, public opinion never bothered Synge. Even with the PLAYBOY, his only concern was that the manuscript might be cut in some way, a thing which he would not hear of under any circumstances. The Sinn Feinn newspaper was hostile to him at times in its reviews, but in spite of its accusations that he was a French decadent, this comment did not trouble Synge. He was a reticent man. He was not egotistical when he never praised any other author's work, but rather merely not aware of the existence of anyone else.

The influence of Synge's life was not only felt upon his own work, but indirectly upon the work of many of his successors. Synge added an underlying rhythm to his prose which he got from his intimate contact with the speech of the Aran peasants. He combined this with his knowledge of music and also of the fluent prose styles of the French classic writers. The fact that this man was in poor health most of his life, especially the latter part of it, that he loved music and nature, and that he was deeply influenced by French authors cannot help but be recognized as direct influences upon his work as a dramatist.

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[10] Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 175.

SECTION III

THE PLAYS

CHAPTER V

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

While Synge was staying on Inishmaan Island of the Aran group, the old man he called Pat Dirane told him the story of a young woman who had married a man much older than herself only to become extremely restless and bored with life. Synge took this tale, one of many which had been handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth, and used it for the theme of his IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN. When this play was first produced, it ". . . met with a very hostile reception. . . in October 1903, because it was alleged to be a libel upon the peasant women of Ireland."[1] The Irish people critized Synge bitterly for presenting a compatriot as unscrupulous and faithless as Nora was represented. The plot was one known and accepted by all familiar with the folk lore of the country when told merely as a story in groups gathered round the fireside in the evening, but

> it is a different thing when the nameless woman in the folk tale is indeed none other than Nora Burke having her being in county Wicklow in our own days. When the dramatist gives so much information to his audience, they are agog to have their own ideas of right and wrong dealt with rather than their feelings about old husbands and young wives and the influence of long periods of fog and mists on the minds of the dwellers in the glens.[2]

The method of presentation made all the difference in the world.

In Pat's account of the legend, which he told in the first person as was his custom, the husband pretended to be dead and was laid out ready for

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[1]A. E. Malone, The Irish Drama, New York, Scribner's Company, 1929, p. 148.

[2]Corkery, John M. Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 133.

the wake to begin when a traveller came to the house. The wife requested the stranger to remain with the dead man a few minutes while she went out to tell the neighbors. He agreed to do this, for, as he said when asked if he would mind, "'Not a bit in the world, M'am,' says I, 'he that's dead can do no hurt.'"[3] Just as soon as the wife went out, however, the dead husband rose up and explained to the somewhat surprised wayfarer how he wanted to trick his unfaithful wife. He took two sticks from a closet, climbed back upon the table where he had been laid out, and pulled the sheet up over him again. As soon as the wife and her lover returned, they went to bed.

> Then the dead man got up, and took one stick, and he gave the other to myself. We went in and saw them lying together with her head on his arm.
>
> The dead man hit him a blow with the stick so that the blood out of him leapt up and hit the gallery.[4]

When Synge used this story, he changed the ending slightly so as to make it able to be presented in a theatre. Shortly after Nora and her young lover, Micheal Dara, returned to the cabin, Mike put his arm around her. At that her deceased husband, Dan Burke, sneezed loudly. This caused such a commotion, that Micheal exclaimed,

> Son of God deliver us.
>
> (Crosses himself, and goes backward across the room.)
>
> Dan (holding up his hand at him). Now you'll not marry her the time I'm rotting below in the Seven Churches, and you'll see the thing I'll give you will follow you on the back mountains when the wind is high.

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[3] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 341.

[4] Ibid., p. 342. Whole story may be found pp. 340-42.

Micheal (to Nora). Get me out of it, Nora, for the love of God. He always did what you bid him, and I'm thinking he would do it now.[5]

Synge changed the ending around to make it more dramatically effective. Nora became doubly fickle. Instead of sticking to Micheal, she decided to go off with the Tramp who was just leaving. Micheal saw he was excess baggage in Dan's broken home and started after Nora and her companion, but Dan stopped him.

Dan. Sit down and take a little taste of the stuff, Micheal Dara. There's a great drouth on me, and the night is young.

Micheal (coming back to the table). And it's very dry I am, surely, with fear of death you put on me, and I after driving mountain ewes since the turn of the day.

Dan (throwing away his stick). I was thinking to strike you, Micheal Dara, but you're a quiet man, God help you, and I don't mind you at all.

(He pours out two glasses of whiskey, and gives one to Micheal).

Dan. Your good health, Micheal Dara.

Micheal. God reward you, Daniel Burke, and may you have a long life, and a quiet life, and good health with it.

(They drink).

Curtain.[6]

Synge had never written a play before IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN. This drama is not as perfect a piece of work as some of his later ones, but as Mr. Corkery pointed out in his book,

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[5]Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 114-15.

[6]Ibid., p. 118.

> He had not yet acquired certainty of touch. The play is a sketch, with some passages as good as any he was afterwards to write; but all of it has the mark of not having been sufficiently thought through.[7]

However, even with its shortcomings, the play is good, and it is amusing. Although it is not a comedy, it should not rightly be classified as a tragedy. Again quoting from Mr. Corkery, "It is certainly not an ironic comedy. It has no purpose, it does not warn against the mating of youth and age . . . however, it has in it the biting of reality. . . ."[8] Even though the resolution of the plot is not tragic, it has a certain inexplicable note of pathos in it when Dan's wife has left with a third man and the old husband asks the man he knows has been his wife's lover to have a drink with him. The two who have been left behind might as well make the best of a situation which has ended badly for both of them. The dialogue shows the start of that Syngesse type of construction which was destined to become so famous throughout Irish drama. "He had got emotion, the driving force he needed, from his life among the people, and it was the working in dialogue that had set free his style."[9] Synge has used an extremely plain background as a setting for this play. He laid it in the central room of a peasant dwelling which contained just the essential pieces of furniture. Irish plays were kept simple because of the lack of money for lavish productions. The set and props for a cottage of this sort could be used over and over again for different plays with only minor changes necessary.

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[7]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 127.

[8]Ibid., p. 133.

[9]Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, p. 125.

In this extremely short one-act play Synge could not show complete, well rounded characterization. This author did his characters in broad, swift strokes and was a master at suggestion. Nora and the Tramp have the largest parts with forty-six and forty-four speeches respectively, yet Dan, who has only seventeen small bits of dialogue, is as well characterized and individualized as either of the first two. He is shown as a pretty shrewd old man who has figured out a clever way of testing his wife's fidelity. Synge has given the audience a complete and clear picture of this suspicious husband and of the Tramp who doesn't quite like being mixed up in the whole affair. These characters show Synge in his apprentice period, but he was skilful even at as early a point as this. "One finds the whole of Synge in this play, sketch as it is. . . . The characters in it are true brothers and sisters of all those he was afterwards to create."[10] Nora was a hastily drawn woman, but Synge made her an individual instead of a representative type. This probably accounts for some of the objections which were raised when the play was first put on in Dublin. Had Nora been less of a person, the public would have thought no more of the episode as a play than as a folk tale. But Nora was not stereotyped; she had a mind of her own, even though she was not endowed with high ideals.

> Synge of course made no effort to create a fine and sensitive woman: in his folk-lore mood such people had no appeal to him. What he created was a piece of naturalistic flesh and blood, wearing her lusts upon her sleeve a being all appetite and no faculty, a woman after his own literary fancy, full of physical courage, daring and bold. And being such, she retains in her

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[10]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 129.

> much of the feeling in the old tale, the spirit of which is frankly naturalistic, as is the way with folk lore.[11]

Synge's style here, although still in its formative state, is individual and characteristic of its author. The langugage seems to flow along with an ease and rapidity of rhythm which is lacking in so many dramatists. He had studied the speech and inflections of these peasants carefully and knew it down to the most minute detail. His preparatory efforts had not been in vain. Synge had captured and was creating something worthwhile.

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[11]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 125.

CHAPTER VI

RIDER'S TO THE SEA

RIDER'S TO THE SEA is recognized by a majority of critics as one of the most perfect one act tragedies which has ever been written and produced in English.

> There are few more flawless tragedies than this little piece, with its subtle blending of diverse elements, from the realism of the cottage interior, displaying an intimate knowledge of Aran customs, to the symphonic quality of the appeal to the ear in the phrasing of the speeches and the wonderful diapason of the caoin.[1]

Each speech is complete in itself, and leads inevitably to the next. There is nothing in the entire piece which could be omitted without spoiling the play as a whole, and every gesture, look, or cry points directly to the ineluctable outcome. From the very first moment, the oppression of coming disaster is foreshadowed as something as inescapable as time itself. Maurya's fifth speech in which she refers to the drowning of the last son, whose body has not yet been found, reflects what she knows inevitably is bound to happen since Bartley, her youngest boy, is going to sea today. This feeling grows stronger as she continues. Finally less than forty lines farther on she says so directly,

> Maurya. It's a hard thing they'll be saying below if the body is washed up and there's no man in it to make the coffin, and I after giving a big price for the finest white boards you'd find in Connemara. . . .

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[1]Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, p. 95.

Maurya. If it wasn't found itself, that wind is raising the sea, and there was a star up against the moon, and is rising in the night. If it was a hundred horses, or a thousand horses you had itself, what is the price of a thousand horses against a son where there is one son only? . . .

Maurya. It's hard set we'll be surely the day you're drownd'd with the rest. What way will I live and the girls with me, and I an old woman looking for the grave? . . .

Maurya (crying out as he is in the door). He's gone now, God spare us, and we'll not see him again. He's gone now, and when black night is falling I'll have no son left me in the world.[2]

From the moment the curtain rises, the audience knows there can be no outcome other than stark tragedy for this drama.

"it is, perhaps, not so much tragedy as a fragment of life"--one might almost say, in the hackneyed phrase, a "slice of life" --"set in the atmosphere of tragedy." . . . It is elegy all through, but elegy in a highly dramatic form. . . . It strikingly exemplifies Synge's unique and felicitous blending of cosmopolitan literature and Irish social experience into a world of heart-rending universal appeal as well as of individual self-expression.[3]

Synge obtained a great deal of his material for this play on one of his early visits to the Aran Islands. Inishmaan, more primitive than most of this group, was his favorite of the islands. For this reason, he based a large part of his subsequent work on the material he gathered during his visits there.

He took the information which lay ready at his hand, and, by the power of sympathy, wove them, with a little modification, into a tragedy, which, for dramatic irony and noble pity, had no equal among its contemporaries.[4]

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[2]Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 86-87.

[3]Bourgeois, John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, pp. 170-71. The first part of this Mr. Bourgeois quoted from Darrell Figgis, THE ART OF J. M. SYNGE. Fortnightly Review, December, 1911.

[4]John Millington Synge, Rider's To The Sea, Boston, John W. Luce Company, 1911, introduction by E. J. O'Brien, p. viii.

The tale of the eternal toll of life which the sea exacted from the Aran peasants made a deep, lasting impression on Synge, but the fact that the men of whole families could be and were wiped out completely by a storm was something which became indelibly imprinted upon his mind.

> Atmosphere and action are both implicit in the words used, and it is by contrasting the homely life of every day with the grim struggle upon which that life depends that the tragic effect is produced. There is no doubt that, whether the play be strictly tragedy or not, it is theatrically effective and true to life. [5]

Maurya emerged from his work as the personified victim of the sea. Synge based the characters for this play on actual figures he had met on the island, and the plot developed from an episode which he witnessed one day.

Synge chose the simplest possible theme for RIDER'S TO THE SEA. It was one of universal despair and the utter futility of life. He took as his characters the fisherfolk who live on barren waste islands which are so rocky and unproductive that almost nothing will grow. In order to gain a scant livelihood, these people raised a few animals which they took over to the mainland in their fragile boats to sell. To this bit of money they added a few shillings by selling most of the fish they caught. These fish also had to be taken to the mainland for disposal. In RIDER'S TO THE SEA Synge has told the pathetic story of a family in which the father and three sons have already been drowned. The fourth son, Michael, had been missing over a week. When the play began some clothes had just been taken from the body of a man who had been washed ashore and at the very start of the play these garments are identified as belonging to Michael. Bartley, Maurya's youngest and only surviving son, had a horse he wanted to sell on the mainland. The day was

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[5] Malone, The Irish Drama, p. 150.

threatening, but in spite of his mother's protests, he decided to go anyway. Naturally as was to be expected, he was lost almost immediately. The old women of the village entered the house a few minutes after he had left, making the sign of the cross which was the customary way of announcing death to the family on this island. In the background Synge has used the keening of the young girls which grows constantly louder as Eugene O'Neill employed the drums in the EMPEROR JONES. This mournful sound set the tone and underlying rhythm of the entire production. Maurya summed up the feeling and dominant spirit of her people when she said,

> . . . (raising her head and speaking as if she did not see the people around her). They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. (To Nora.) Give me the Holy Water, Nora, there's a small sup still on the dresser.[6]

Here, as in IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN, he used a bare peasant dwelling, scantily furnished, as the scene for the entire play. The structure in itself is as simple as dramatic form can have. He used the one act frame for the story which of necessity limits the dramatist to the expression of only the most essential facts. B. H. Clark drew an interesting comparison between this and the final act of HAMLET when he said,

> RIDER'S TO THE SEA serves to illustrate the essential difference between the one-act play and the full length play. Since the former is almost always concerned with but a single incident, it is capable of very little development. Now a tragedy is not a

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[6]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 96.

fact or an event; it shows great and strong characters . . . struggling with forces which are finally too great to be overcome. And we see the struggle. . . . A one act play can scarcely do more than indicate the consequences of a struggle. The last act of HAMLET is not tragedy in itself, and RIDER'S TO THE SEA, like that last act, is only the result of what has gone on for a long time before.[7]

This author went on to say,

It is here suggested (in Aristotle's definition)[8] that a certain development is necessary, and development in the one-act play is a single scene, incident, or situation, and we cannot see more than one stage in the development of a person or situation. It might also be said that the most momentous developments in tragedy occur between the acts: what we see is almost entirely the crucial points during the period of development.[9]

All drama must have a conflict. Here the only conflict brought out is that of

. . . the sea as the human protagonist with which this old woman, whose husband and five sons have been its prey, is striving. . . . How Synge brings us to realize the malignity of the sea is worth noting; he brings us to view it, to apprehend it, through the island consciousness. . . . For them (the fisherfolk) the sea is no new revelation: its worst is of old and familiar: in Aran voices are not raised against the whirlwind: as the whirlwind rises, their voices sink to a lower whispering.[10]

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[7]Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama, p. 340.

[8]Aristotle's definition of an ideal tragedy: Tragedy is the imitation of an action, serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in the form of action not narrative, through pity and fear effecting the purgation of emotions of pity and fear. As given by Professor Joseph Richard Taylor, Boston University.

[9]Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama, p. 341.

[10]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 140.

There has been a great deal of comment on whether this is sufficient conflict to make RIDER'S TO THE SEA a true tragedy. Helen Cohen thought

> Its crises may be crises of character as well as conflicts of will or physical conflicts; it must be by a method of foreshadowing, sustain the interest of the audience unflaggingly, but ultimately relieve their tension; it must achieve swift characterization by means of pantomine and dialogue; and its dialogue must achieve its effects by the same methods as the dialogue of longer plays, but by even greater economy of means.[11]

> The incident is painful rather than dramatic, for the struggle must be imagined, it cannot be seen and apprehended by the audience. Consequently, we might almost feel that the struggle here depicted was so hopeless as to leave no room for anything but dumb submission. Tragedy is usually the spectacle of man in conflict with other men, or with circumstances against which he has, or seems to have, a fighting chance. Synge's play, however, is little more than a spectacle showing the result of a conflict in which man has no chance at all.[12]

There was certainly an inward struggle in old Maurya when Bartley finally went off despite all her efforts to restrain him. She almost conquered her own emotions when she went out after him, but her supernatural vision made her turn back too soon. In the end she realized fate could not be overcome; therefore she became resigned to it. Mr. Sherman commented,

> . . . Strictly speaking, RIDER'S TO THE SEA is not a tragedy at all, because it is not a drama. It might with more propriety be called a tragic idyl--a sombre picture, impressive enough in its kind, with the fearful whispering of the young girls, whose necks have not become bowed beneath the ancient burden, and the grey old mother, who looks before and after and has passed through all illusions, sitting there patiently, passively, receiving the tidings of disaster.[13]

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[11] Cohen, <u>One Act Plays By Modern Authors</u>, p. xix.

[12] Clark, <u>A Study of the Modern Drama</u>, p. 339.

[13] Sherman, <u>On Contemporary Literature</u>, p. 209.

RIDER'S TO THE SEA was first performed in Molesworth Hall in Dublin in February of 1904 by the players of the Irish National Theatre. W. G. Fay played the part of Bartley, Sarah Allgood was Catherine, and Maurya was played by Miss Honor Lavalle.

The characters in this play live and have a certain vitality to them which is lacking in so many modern dramatist's work. Mr. O'Brien commented upon the characters in an introduction which he wrote to RIDER'S TO THE SEA by saying that "Its characters live--and die. It is their virtue in life to be lonely and none but the lonely man in tragedy may be great."[14] Through the characters the customs, the feelings, and innermost thoughts of these people were revealed as they had never been revealed before. Maurya was an integral character. The other characters, although they are individualized to some extent, are not ones which are long remembered by their names. Catherine and Bartley are, rather, type characters which places the play in the realm of the supernatural. With the exception of the one central figure Synge did not care much about the others except in their relationship to Maurya. In the brief one act form a play must have one dominant incident and one dominant character. This play conforms to both of these requirements.

RIDER'S TO THE SEA is almost as good an example of Synge's command and use of language as is to be found in his works. The feeling of the sea is shown throughout in the underlying rhythmic quality of his prose which, at times, is almost scannable. By the most stringent economy of words or even thought, he can suggest the entire picture.

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[14]Synge, Rider's To The Sea, introduction by E. J. O'Brien, p. x.

> Synge's mastery of words is one of his greatest assets. Like Shakespeare, he can suggest environment by purely verbal means. Beautiful words and sentences are not necessarily an integral part of drama, but dramatic language that is beautiful in itself means much . . .[15]

Through his wonderful command of language and powers of self-expression, Synge has been able to express the Irish feeling. These people, who have lived such tragic existences, are not a happy folk, yet they are uncomplaining.

> And among the many who have written of Irish woe, John M. Synge in his RIDER'S TO THE SEA cleaves deepest and comes nearest to the unhappy heart of the nation. . . . The spirit moving in old Maurya . . . is a fragment of the nobility springing from the hearts of all mothers who have given their loved ones to sudden and inescapable doom.[16]

Synge never used an adjective to modify the noun "sea" as he felt the word denoted in itself too powerful a force to need any modification. The sea was such a powerful symbol in the lives of these natives that no word could possibly augment or decrease that power.

Weygandt felt RIDER'S TO THE SEA was not representative of Synge,

> . . . for it is written on one note, the note of the dirge, of the dirge of the tides that sound their menace of the sea through Inishmaan. It is less representative of Synge in that it has no revelation of tumult of soul. It is less representative of Synge in that it is less original than any of his plays, reminiscent in fact all but its style, now of Ibsen, now of M. Materlinck, now even of Mr. Edward Martyn. And his style itself is not what his style was in IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN, nor what it became again in THE WELL OF THE SAINT.[17]

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[15]Clark, A Study of the Modern Drama, p. 339.

[16]Curtis Canfield, Plays Of The Irish Renaissance 1880-1930, New York, Washburn Company, 1929, p. 115

[17]Weygandt, Irish Plays and Playwrights, p. 178.

When the intimacy of Synge's life with the people on the Aran Islands is considered, it would seem the play is indeed representative of a certain phase and period of his work. Peasant plays were the vital interest in his life for the greater part of his dramatic period. The facts as he saw them were presented in the form of this one-act tragedy, and as such RIDER'S TO THE SEA became representative of its author.

CHAPTER VII

THE WELL OF THE SAINTS

THE WELL OF THE SAINTS was Synge's first three act play. It had its opening performance at the Abbey Theatre in February, 1905, by the Irish National Theatre Society, under the direction of Mr. W. G. Fay, the then managing director of the Company. Although Ernest A. Boyd said,

> In THE WELL OF THE SAINTS, his fourth play, Synge definitely proclaimed his control of the dramatic medium by the ease with which he abandoned the one-act for the three-act form, the two acts of THE TINKER'S WEDDING having served to mark the transition.[1]

The preface to THE TINKER'S WEDDING is dated December 2, 1907 which was almost three years after the production of THE WELL OF THE SAINTS.[2] Synge has brought out a great deal of philosphy as well as character development in this simple story of the blind couple who have their sight restored to them through the miraculous powers of some Holy Water, but are so disillusioned by the sordid life they see, they choose to become blind once more.

In this play Synge was deeply concerned with characterization. Mary and Martin Doul grew and developed as the play unfolded. These two blind old beggars are simple people when the curtain goes up, taking pleasure in the little things around them, and in their own thoughts of each other. Their friends have always told these two ghastly looking hags how beautiful they are and they have believed what they were told. Timmy the smith, Mat

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[1]Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, p. 99.

[2]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 178. No production date is given in this edition for THE TINKER'S WEDDING.

Simon, and the others felt as long as the couple was blind they might as well think themselves handsome, so they have deceived the Douls all these years, thinking their deception would never be found out. Mary and Martin Doul are so happy in this.

> Mary Doul. Who wouldn't have a cracked voice sitting out all the year in the rain falling? It's a bad life for the voice, Martin Doul, though I've heard tell there isn't anything like the wet south wind does be blowing upon us for keeping a white beautiful skin--the like of my skin--on your neck and on your brows, and there isn't anything at all like a fine skin for putting splendour on a woman.
>
> Mary Doul . . . and a power besides saying the fine things of my face, and you know rightly it was 'the beautiful dark woman' they did call me in Ballinatone.[3]

Timmy the smith has heard of a priest who has some water taken from a well which flows beside the grave of four saints. This water, when sprinkled on the eyes of the blind, will restore sight. This priest is going to pass in a few minutes and will cure Mary and Martin Doul. They all await the holy father eagerly, but when Martin says,

> (turning suddenly to Mary Doul). And we'll be seeing ourselves this day. Oh, glory be to God, is is true surely?[4]

Timmy begins to realize that their innocent lies may have bad repercussions after all.

> Timmy (pityingly). The two of you will see a great wonder this day, and it's no lie.[5]
>
> Timmy (anxiously). God help him. . . . What will be he doing when he sees his wife this day? I'm thinking it was bad work we

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[3] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 122.

[4] Ibid., p. 128.

[5] Ibid., p. 132.

did when we let on she was fine-looking, and not a wrinkled, wizened hag the way she is.[6]

Through the disillusionment of these two old people, Synge shows his marvelous insight into human nature and understanding of the philosophy of the human mind. The priest takes the husband into the church first, while Mary kneels outside. As Martin comes out of the church, wild with the joy of being able to see once more, he passed his wife as Synge puts it in a stage direction,

> (. . . comes past Mary Doul as she scrambles to her feet, drawing a little away from her as he goes by.)[7]

Then the heart-rending tragedy begins to show itself.

> Martin Doul (crying out joyfully). That's Timmy I know Timmy by the black of his head. . . . (He sees Molly Byrne on Mary Doul's seat, and his voice changes completely.) Oh, it was no lie they told me, Mary Doul. Oh, glory to God and the seven saints I didn't die and not see you at all. The blessing of God on the water, and the feet carried it round through the land. The blessing of God on this day, and them that brought me the Saint, for it's grand hair you have (she lowers her head a little confused), and soft skin, and eyes would make the saints, if they were dark awhile and seeing again, fall down out of the sky. (He goes nearer to her.) Hold up your head, Mary, the way I'll see it's richer I am than the great kings of the east. Hold up your head, I'm saying, for it's soon you'll be seeing me, and I not a bad one at all.
>
> . . . Molly Byrne. Let you keep away from me, and not be soiling my chin.
>
> Martin Doul (bewildered). It's Molly's voice you have.
>
> . . . Martin Doul. Which of you all is herself? (He goes up to Bride.) Is it you is Mary Doul? I'm thinking you're more the like of what they said (peering at her). For you've yellow

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[6]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 135.

[7]Ibid., p. 135.

hair, and white skin, and it's the smell of my own turf is rising from your shawl.[8]

The crowd of people who have collected around the church to watch the miracle begin to laugh and make fun of him. The scene is pathetic. When Mary comes out of the church and they see each other for the first time Synge shows how much more powerful restraint is than effusion by using one deft stroke to convey the whole emotional strain of the situation.

(They stare at each other blankly.)

. . . Molly Byrne (to Mary Doul). You're not saying a word, Mary. What is it you think of himself, with the fat legs on him, and the little neck like a ram?

Mary Doul. I'm thinking it's a poor thing when the Lord God gives you sight and puts the like of that man in your way.[9]

Act two shows what a struggle these two people have in readjusting themselves to a life in which they have their sight. Martin finds his job with Timmy the smith arduous, and he cannot stand the sight of poor Mary who feels much the same towards him. They do nothing but argue and bicker among themselves. Martin makes love to Molly who is engaged to marry Timmy the smith, but she is repulsed by him. Finally he looses his job and becomes blind again. In the last act both Mary and Martin are blind once more, but things are not as easy for them as before, because they have known what sight is and now it is twice as hard for them to get around. They stumble on everything; they are lonely in their blindness because they are separated from each other.

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[8]Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 136-37.

[9]Ibid., pp. 138-39.

> Mary Doul (mournfully). Ah, God help me. . . . God help me; the blackness wasn't so black at all the other time, and it's destroyed I'll be now, and hard set to get my living working alone, when it's few are passing and the winds are cold. . . .
>
> (She stays perfectly quiet. Martin Doul gropes in on right, blind also.)
>
> Martin Doul (gloomily). The devil mend Mary Doul for putting lies on me, and getting on she was grand. The devil mend the old Saint for letting me see it was lies. . . .[10]

The illusions they had for each other are gone, but when they find they are both together, lonely, and blind again, they try to reestablish the old feelings. Mary says,

> . . . For when I seen myself in them pools, I seen my hair would be gray or white, maybe, in a short while, and I seen with it that I'd a face would be a great wonder when it'll have soft white hair falling around it, the way when I'm an old woman there won't be the like of me surely in the seven counties of the east.[11]

Martin grasps this idea as the drowning man a straw. He, too, wants to get back into the old way of looking at things.

> Martin Doul (bursting with excitement). I've this to say, Mary Doul. I'll be letting my beard grow in a short while, a beautiful long, white, silken, streamy beard, you wouldn't see the like of in the eastern world. . . .
>
> Mary Doul (laughing cheerfully). Well, we're a great pair, surely, and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die .[12]

Just as they are deciding to go on together, the Saint reappears and wants to give them back their sight once more, promising that the restoration would be

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[10] Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 156-57.

[11] Ibid., p. 160.

[12] Ibid., p. 161.

permanent this time. The blind couple beg him,

> Martin Doul (more troubled). We're not asking our sight, holy father, and let you walk on your own way, and be fasting, or praying, or doing anything that you will, but leave us here in our peace, at the crossing of the roads, for it's best we are this way, and we're not asking to see.[13]

> Mary Doul (doubtfully). Let us be as we are, holy father, and then we'll be known again in a short while as the people is happy and blind, and be having an easy time, with no trouble to live, and we getting halfpence on the road.[14]

Martin finally strikes the can of Holy Water from the Saint's hand, and the curtain falls with Mary going off hand in hand with him towards the unknown south. Their friends think they will probably be drowned, but realize they can do nothing to stop this blind couple. Mr. Corkery comments on the characters of this play as follows,

> Timmy the smith, Molly Byrne, and the few others in the play, are brought in simply to carry on the action. Martin Doul and Mary Doul are the play. . . . Almost any other writer might have created, if this is not too big a word, either the Playboy or Pegeen, but nobody except Synge himself could have spied out in the swirling currents of life around us, these two blind creatures, fastened on them with a keen eye, and rescuing them in all their integrity, not only for our entertainment but also for our enlightment as to the depths and riches of those self same swirling tides.[15]

Again Synge took his plot from various sources. He found the story of course on the Aran Islands. Corkery and Weygandt had different opinions on the actual sources.

> Where, if anywhere, he came upon the fable is not certain. . . . His mind was actively creative, which is to say that whatever it seized upon, it made truly its own, the matter seized

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[13] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 166.

[14] Ibid., p. 169.

[15] Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 173.

upon becoming not more but less refined, less abstract, less a thought or idea and more a gesturing, quaint-spoken boon companion of the whole tatterdemalion gipsy-gaudy crew his memory had gathered from byeway and tavern, keeping them in fee as an old-time king his dwarfs and fools.[16]

Old Mourteen, a 'dark man,' who taught him Gaelic on Aranmoor, suggested Martin Doul, the chief character of the play, and it was Mourteen told him, too, the story of the well whose water would give sight to blind eyes. A story told Synge on Inishere supplied the saint, and a tramp in Wicklow the thoughts of Martin Doul and Mary Doul as to the glory their hair would be to them in age.[17]

One of the charms of John Synge's work was that above all he was a poet, and even his prose contained all the cadence of poetry. THE WELL OF THE SAINTS was no exception to this. This play had as musical prose as could be found in any of his work all the way through it. Take, as an example, the following passage which he put into the mouth of Timmy the smith.

Ay, a fine saint, who's going round through the churches of Ireland, with a long cloak on him, and naked feet, for he's brought a sup of water slung at his side, and, with the like of him, any little drop is enough to cure the dying, or to make the blind see as clear as the gray hawks do be high up, on a still day, sailing the sky.[18]

Synge used alliteration of the letter "s", a poetic simile, and there is a lyrical suggestion in the passage. Mr. Williams was truly correct when he said,

It is difficult to conceive of THE WELL OF THE SAINTS bettered in any respect. In its spiritual insight, its psychology, its dialogue, its allegory which carries no obtrusive message, it is the greatest thing Synge ever wrote.[19]

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[16]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 154.

[17]Weygandt, Irish Plays and Playwrights, p. 170.

[18]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 128.

[19]Williams, Modern English Writers, p. 216.

In this play, Synge used the peasants' reverent belief in the powers of miracles, especially those connected with things of the church, and has combined with this the clearly vivid life of the imagination with that of the humdrum existence of every day experience.

> The effort at pointing a moral at the end is amiss. It is the nearest approach in Synge to a direct lesson: his plays, truly literary, teach only through the sympathies and antipathies when, as we say, his hand is in.[20]

Synge through the growth of the two characters, their disillusionment, and the way in which they finally face life together with the idea of making the best of their unfortunate lot, gives his reader and his audience something fundamental and a better insight into his own philosophy here than in any of the other plays.

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[20]Corkery, Synge and The Anglo-Irish Literature, pp. 177-78.

CHAPTER VIII

THE TINKER'S WEDDING

This two act play of John Synge's differed entirely from those which composed the rest of his dramatic work. The plot was not one based upon folk lore, nor did it treat the humble peasant life contending with its overpowering problems as did RIDER'S TO THE SEA. With the introduction of the tin can episode into THE TINKER'S WEDDING, Synge lost a great deal of that fresh originality which set his plays so far apart and above those of other contemporary dramatists. This made it mechanical, and at times, turned it into almost slapstick comedy. The plot did not ring true, and

> Lacking reality, the play is barren of such joy as is deepened by our recollections of life: and as an element in drama joy must be assessed by the self same tests we apply to terror in a play: we are to be moved by it in the totality of our being, toughened as we have been by living among men and women.[1]

THE TINKER'S WEDDING was an unreal farce which told the tale of an itinerant tinker who had been living with Sarah Casey as his wife for years without benefit of clergy. Suddenly this woman felt the urge to have the blessing of the church on this strange union. Michael thought this a ridiculous expenditure of hard earned cash, but, after Sarah threatened to go off with another man, he consented to it if she would make the necessary arrangements, because, as he told his mother,

> . . . (gloomily). If I didn't marry her, she'd be walking off to Jaunting Jim maybe at the fall of night; and it's well yourself

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[1]Corkery, Synge and the Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 150.

knows there isn't the like of her for getting money and selling songs to men.[2]

Mary Byrne, the tinker's mother, even though she realized Sarah's intrinsic value in this respect, felt the mere fact they were married would not make Sarah faithful if she really wanted to run off with the other fellow. Sarah put up an awful fuss when she heard of the plan as the ten shillings Sarah had saved up for the priest's fee would have bought her many a bottle of porter! The priest told Sarah Casey his price for performing a marriage ceremony was one pound, but after much entreaty and because these two lost souls might have more chance of salvation in the end if they were married, he said he would marry them for ten shillings plus a large new tin can which they were to bring to the church the next day. Michael made the can and carefully wrapped it up so it would not rust from the dew, then he and Sarah started off to steal chickens. While they were gone the mother took the shiney can and traded it for a good draught of ale. She carefully wrapped three empty bottles in the cloth she had taken from the tin can and put the package back where she had found it. The next day, just before the priest started to marry the couple, he discovered the deception and refused to perform the ceremony. Sarah and Michael bound and gagged him so he could not notify the peelers. Finally, after much horseplay, he promised not to tell on them, and they let him go free. Sarah decided perhaps Mary had been right after all about a wedding being foolishness.

Sarah (puts the ring on his finger). There's the ring, holy father, to keep you minding of your oath until the end of time;

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[2]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 200.

for my heart's scalded with your fooling; and it'll be a long day till I go making talk of marriage or the like of that.[3]

This play was banned from the Irish stage. Synge's continental influence was brought out clearly here. He did not have the Irish viewpoint at all. He looked at things from the broader continental and therefore much more tolerant, stand. Malone pointed out,

> . . . English people will laugh at their follies, and enjoy the fun, but Irish people will not; there is personal laughter, that is laughter at things that are personal, in Ireland, but there is none of the communal laughter which can treat the affairs of the entire nation as its object. Synge very quickly discovered that when his PLAYBOY was mobbed and THE TINKER'S WEDDING was banned from the Irish stage; . . . [4]

The characters in this play were weak and not completely individualized. Michael remained all the way through a stereotyped low class dumbell without any personality whatsoever. Sarah Casey had a few ideas of her own and could lead the others around, but she still remained weak. Mary had a touch of humor to her when she was drunk, and showed some ingenuity when she fooled the other two with the three empty beer bottles instead of the tin can which they had left in the croaker sack, but Synge did not develop her far enough to make her an outstanding personality. The only place where he took any time on characterization was Mary's last speech in the first act. She was drunk, and he made use of the opportunity for the humor which was at his disposal here. He did this passage with feeling and this bit of dialogue seemed more characteristic of him than any other in the whole play.

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[3]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 209.

[4]Malone, The Irish Drama, p. 224.

Mary (standing up slowly). It's gone they are, and I with my feet that weak under me you'd knock me down with a rush, and my head with a noise in it the like of what you'd hear in a stream and it running between two rocks and rain falling. (She goes over to the ditch where the can is tied in sacking, and takes it down.)[5]

In her drunken stupor, she knew she had been left alone while the other two have gone off, perhaps to have a good time. Self pity took possession of her.

What good am I this night, God help me? What good are the grand stories I have when it's few would listen to an old woman, few but a girl maybe would be in a great fear the time her hour was come, or a little child wouldn't be sleeping with the hunger on a cold night? (She takes the can from the sacking and fits in three empty bottles and straw in its place, and ties them up.)[5]

Then slowly, the idea of how she could get revenge on them for leaving her behind and at the same time how she might obtain something more to drink, began to formulate in her mind.

Maybe the two of them have a good right to be walking out the short while they'd be young; but if they have itself, they'll not keep Mary Byrne from her full pint when the night's fine, and there's a dry moon in the sky. (She takes up the can, and puts the package back in the ditch.) Jemmy Neill's a decent lad; and he'll give me a good drop for the can;[5]

Then her conscience began to prick her a little.

and maybe if I keep near the peelers to-morrow for the first bit of the fair, herself won't strike me at all; and if she does itself, what's a little stroke on your head beside sitting lonesome on a fine night, hearing the dogs barking, and the bats squeaking, and you saying over, it's a short while only till you die.

(She goes out singing "The Night Before Larry Was Stretched.")[5]

In this play Synge made the priest a grasping, unholy man. He was interested in the money element above everything, and only once gave the slightest

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[5]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 194.

consideration to the sacred side of his mission in life. He decided he could help save their souls by marrying them at a sacrifice price, but the minute the payment turned out to be short he forgot all about saving the couple's souls for the next world!

Although Synge used some lovely figures of speech in this play such as "and my head with a noise in it the like of what you'd hear in a stream and it running between two rocks and rain falling"[6] and "quenched the flaming candles on the throne of God"[7] the scenes did not abound with similes and well thought out comparisons like the other five of his works. He seemed too pre-occupied with the mechanics of the plot to consider the ornamentation of language. The other dramas flowed along almost unaided which left Synge's mind free to focus on the linguistic qualities of the dialogue. Here, the story gave the impression of one over which he had labored long and hard to make everything come out his way. The subject matter of THE TINKER'S WEDDING was not pleasing and his treatment did not help it, as did the method he used in RIDER'S TO THE SEA which was so tragic. Had the latter been handled in a less artistic manner, it would have been unbearable.

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[6]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 194.

[7]Ibid., p. 198.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

When the Abbey Theatre players produced John M. Synge's THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD in Dublin, little did the managers realize what a controversy they would have to face not only there in Ireland, but also in America as well. After THE WELL OF THE SAINTS had met with a hostile reception, Synge told Mr. Fay one night that in the next play he wrote he would really give the public something to be annoyed at.[1]

Synge was not willing to cut the text of the PLAYBOY at all after it was once written as he said it would not then be his own work if he changed it according to someone else's suggestion. Mr. Fay had an inkling that perhaps there would be some criticism of one or two of the passages, but even he was not expecting a riot in the theatre. However, much to his surprise the audience took exception, not to the word "bloody" which is considered most vulgar in the British Isles, but to the word "shift" which he felt was about as irreproachable a word as could be found in the English language. Webster's COLLEGIATE DICTIONARY, fifth edition, defines "shift" as "a woman's undergarment". A riot such as had never before been witnessed in a theatre broke out. When the players who were not only the object of catcalls, boos, and hisses, but also of well aimed missles faltered, hesitating whether to continue the performance in spite of the din, the order went out to go ahead and finish their lines, whether anyone heard them or not. The policies of

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[1]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 211.

the Abbey Players were not to be dictated by the Dublin rabble. Finally the curtain was lowered, much to the relief of the Company, but they were told the advertised number of productions would be given just the same. This meant a full week more.

> On the second performance of THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD about forty men who sat in the middle of the pit succeeded in making the entire play inaudible. Some of them brought tin-trumpets, and the noise began immediately on the rise of the curtain.[2] The failure of the audience to understand this powerful and strange work has been the one serious failure of our movement and it could not have happened but that the greatest number of those who came to shout down the play were no part of our audience at all, but members of parties and societies whose main interests are political.[3]

The PLAYBOY continued. So did the riots. The police were called in, and Yeats described the scene as follows:

> . . . Picturesque, poetical, fantastical, a masterpiece of style and of music, the supreme work of our dialect theatre, his PLAYBOY roused the populace to fury. We played it under police protection, seventy police in the theatre the last night and five hundred, some newspaper said, keeping order in the street outside. It is never played before an Irish audience for the first time without something or other flung at the players.[4]

The week drew to a close, and things were no better than when the PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD opened. Mr. Fay, the manager of the Company, commented,

> We played the PLAYBOY for the full number of advertised performances, matinee included. . . . The incident was a lamentable business from every point of view as the future proved. If it taught the public that they could not dictate the policy of the theatre, that was all. However, you cannot beat the public in

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[2]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, p. 193.

[3]Ibid., p. 197.

[4]Yeats, Dramatis Personae, p. 197.

the end, as I had warned Synge and the other directors, because they can always boycott you. And that was what happened after the PLAYBOY.[5]

After the Dublin episode, the PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD was performed in London with no trouble at all. The audience accepted it as an outstanding contribution to dramatic literature of the time and gave Synge a great ovation when he took his curtain call after the play was over. The PLAYBOY'S next adventure took place while the Abbey Players were on tour in America. In Boston, Chicago, and Philadephia there were riots and in Philadelphia the Company was arrested. Finally the legal situation was cleared up and the Abbey Players continued on their way. Lady Gregory felt that, if there was nothing else gained through the PLAYBOY controversy, it served to give Synge world wide fame, and she also thought that,

> . . . we should have been ashamed if we had not insisted on a hearing for his most important work. But, had it been a far inferior play and written by some young writer who had never been heard of, we should have had to do the same thing.[6]

Synge told in his little volume, THE ARAN ISLANDS, about how he heard the story which he afterwards made into THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD. He said,

> Another old man, the oldest on the island, is fond of telling me anecdotes--not folk tales--of things that have happened here in his lifetime.
>
> He often tells me about a Connaught man who killed his father with the blow of a spade when he was in passion, and then fled to this island and threw himself on the mercy of some of the natives with

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[5]Fay and Carrwell, The Fays of the Abbey Theatre, p. 219.

[6]Gregory, Our Irish Theatre, pp. 116-17. This book also contains a detailed account of the PLAYBOY controversy in America.

> whom he was said to be related. They hid him in a hole--which the old man has shown me--and kept him safe for weeks, though the police came and searched for him, and he could hear their boots grinding on the stones over his head. In spite of a reward which was offered, the island was incorruptible, and after much trouble the man was safely shipped to America.[7]

Using this as a plot neucleus, he created his PLAYBOY. Briefly, the plot was this. Young Pegeen Mike was to be married to Shawn Keogh. Her father, a publican, left her alone at the tavern one night while he attended a wake quite a distance away. Christy Mahon, the Playboy, came in just before Michael James left, seeking shelter for the night and something to eat. After Christy explained why he needed protection, namely that in a fit of anger, he had killed his father with a loy "Tuesday was a week", Michael James told him he could be pot boy of the tavern. The job was not hard, and afforded complete protection for him so he took it. As soon as the story of his boldly daring deed or crime as you will, was known, Christy became the local hero as well as the recipient of numerous gifts and the admiration of all the young girls of the village, a thing which he had never had before in his own locality but was very pleasing to him. Right in the middle of his glory, just after he won all the games of some local festival, in walked his father, very much alive, suffering only from a badly bruised head which was swathed in bandages! Christy's glamour fell from his shoulders immediately. He was no longer the village hero. In order to rectify this and restore himself to his old position, he hit his father over the head again, and everybody thought he had surely killed him this time. Instead of ad-

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[7]Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 369-70.

miring him now, the crowd was horrified by the brutality of his action. Christy was to be handed over to the police immediately and hanged, but again he had only stunned his father. Old Mahon entered the tavern once more.

> Jimmy (seeing old Mahon). Will you look what's come in?
>
> (They all drop Christy and run left.)
>
> Christy (scrambling on his knees face to face with old Mahon). Are you coming to be killed a third time, or what ails you now?
>
> Mahon. For what is it they have you tied?
>
> Christy. They're taking me to the peelers to have me hanged for slaying you.[8]

Old Mahon took his son out with him and started back for his home. Pegeen was crushed and the curtain fell after she said, "Oh, my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World."[9]

Synge brought out the Irish peasant's belief in superstitions in this play, and it also showed the large influence folk-lore had in the lives of these primitive people. Most ignorant peasants were superstitious about death and corpses.

> Shawn (going to her, soothingly). Then I'm thinking himself will stop along with you when he sees you taking on, for it'll be a long night-time with the great darkness, and I'm after feeling a kind of fellow above in the furzy ditch, groaning wicked like a maddening dog, the way it's good cause you have, maybe, to be fearing now.[10]

Shawn thought the man was either dead or dying, but had carefully avoided making a complete investigation. Michael James, Pegeen's father, illustrated the belief in folk-lore when he said,

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[8]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 79.

[9]Ibid., p. 80.

[10]Ibid., pp. 9-10.

> . . . (good humouredly). Isn't it the same whether I go for the whole night or a part only? And I'm thinking it's a queer daughter you are if you'd have me crossing backward through the Stooks of the Dead Women, with a drop taken.[11]

Each section of Ireland, especially the more primitive of the islands, had beliefs peculiar to its own locality and this Stooks of the Dead Women was one which Synge made belong to this community. These touches were what made his work great, and,

> THE PLAYBOY is, if not Synge's best play, at least his most important and representative contribution to the modern stage, and will long remain for literary and otherwise, the Abbey Theatre Company's centerpiece.[12]

It was in these little ways Synge made his plays works of art. He gave intimate touches to the life of the people which differentiated his writings from average dramas. This author learned these things from the daily contact he had had with the Aran Islanders. Not only were his characters human and alive but his backgrounds were vibrant with that same vitality. His plots were grotesque, but in their grotesquerie they struck a keynote chord which so many dramatists miss entirely--that of creating something worthwhile through beauty of expression and thought-prevoking prose. Yeats has said of him along this same line,

> . . . Yet I am certain that, in the long run, his grotesque plays with their lyric beauty, their violent laughter, THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD most of all, will be loved for holding so much of the mind of Ireland.[13]

The manner in which Synge brought all his factors together--the superstitions and beliefs of the people, the backgrounds, the dialects, his sympathy and

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[11]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 11

[12]Bourgeois, John M. Synge and The Irish Theatre, pp. 211-12.

[13]Yeats, The Cutting of the Agate, p. 187.

enthusiasm for life--all made his style different even from that of the men who were trying to do precisely the same thing. B. H. Clark felt "he had no purpose but that of allowing his living creatures to revel in life, and express themselves in the rich and sensuous poetry which he created.[14]

This play contained eleven characters which is more than any one of the other of his six dramatic works with the exception of his DEIRDRE which contained the same number.[15] Of all these forty-two characters, perhaps Christy showed more development and was more fully treated than any of the rest. The Playboy was lazy, impetuous, and out for a good time. Synge gave the impression throughout the play this boy had never had a good time at home.

> Jimmy. Did you marry three wives maybe? . . .
>
> Christy (shyly). I never married one, let alone a couple or three.[16]
>
> Christy. I never left my own parish till Tuesday was a week.[17]
>
> Christy (very confidentially). Up to the day I killed my father, there wasn't a person in Ireland knew the kind I was, and I there drinking, waking, eating, sleeping, a quiet, simple poor fellow with no man giving me heed.[18]

After the neighboring girls asked him to tell his story a few times, the tale began to take on larger proportions and became better with each retelling.

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[14] Clark, A Study of Modern Drama, p. 343.

[15] RIDER'S TO THE SEA 5, IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN 4, THE WELL OF THE SAINTS 7, THE TINKER'S WEDDING 4.

[16] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 16.

[17] Ibid., p. 17.

[18] Ibid., p. 24.

He was self confident and opinionated when his father appeared and burst his bubble. Synge showed the inner workings of the Playboy's mind when he had him strike his father the second time as this showed Christy vainly grasping to retain his shattered fame. However, the disillusionment was great, and not only did the fellow find his glory completely gone, but he found himself repulsive to everyone. Christy matured while he was afraid he was going to be hanged, and continued in character growth until he became a sober thoughtful man at the end of the play. Pegeen Mike was also made into a human being. She was fickle in her affections, had her head turned by the audacity and daring of the Playboy's escapade, but, by the end of the play, showed clearly this was merely an interlude in her life. The curtain fell, leaving the impression that when the banns of the church were published for the third time so the priest could marry them, she would wed Shawn Keogh willingly!

CHAPTER X

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS

The legend upon which Synge based DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS is one which was well known to the Irish people. Both Yeats and "AE" had written dramas around it before Synge began his. This author treated it from a new viewpoint and dwelt on the tragic aspect of the story which was clearly shown from his title, DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS. Deirdre reflected Synge's own philosophy, especially on death as he wrote this play when this was uppermost in his mind. In this three-act tragedy Synge combined the ancient legend, so familiar to all who knew Irish folk-lore, with his own feelings.

> Like his DEIRDRE Synge had begun to realize the sweet tragedy of love; like his Deirdre, he was doomed to die in the heyday of his power. . . . It is this coming sense of love, this early expectation of death gives the play its supreme beauty; the author, having obtained full mastery over his medium, is able to comprehend and express the deepest of all truths--the truth of the nature of existence; it is because he bids farewell to life that he grasps it to the full.[1]

Perhaps his sympathetic understanding of the problem of approaching death and final separation from those closest in the bonds of love, gave Synge the power to express these ideas and feelings which other authors completely lacked when treating the self same subject. This play is fine in every detail, and although Synge did not live to complete it, Cornelius Weygandt felt it was so good he said,

> There is scarcely a poet, of all that have written of Ireland from the time of Ferguson to our time, that has not written his

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[1] Bourgeois, John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 217.

> dream of Deirdre as he finds her in the old legends of Ireland, but to my mind no one has dreamed her so triumphantly as has Synge.[2]

Synge took this old material which had been reworked so often by such widely divergent types of authors, and gave it a unique fresh treatment, thus making it wholly his own. His langugage and character delineation were definitely Syngesse in feeling and style, revealing the true mark of genius which was his.

> In spite of the variously successful rehandling of this classic theme by numerous predecessors, Synge's version has such beauty and originality as could only come from so powerful and independent a genius.[3]

This piece, as one author puts it, "where Synge's other plays are lyric, DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS is intense."[4] There was a depth of feeling and insight in this one which Synge did not reach in the five which preceded it. " . . . Intensity should be the chief note in tragedy. The dramatist was triumphing over the lyric poet. Indeed it is only in DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS that Synge is purely dramatist."[5] Synge gave the impression here that he was putting all his strength and ability into this dramatic piece, making it his supreme effort. It was written while he was dying, some parts of it finished after he went to the hospital during his final illness.

> Deirdre has all the sadness of Synge's own tragic conviction that "death is a poor untidy thing at best, though it's a queen that

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[2]Weygandt, Irish Plays and Playwrights, p. 184.

[3]Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, p. 107.

[4]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 214.

[5]Ibid., p. 214.

> dies."[6] The personal tragedy of the dramatist, and the intense reality of the characters drawn from a people allied by untamed nature to their prototypes of a legend, combine to give this work an intensity unequalled by any other tragic writer. Unfinished as it is, DEIRDRE promises to be, if not Synge's masterpiece, the greatest modern version of the Gaelic classic.[7]

Had Synge lived long enough to make the final revisions himself, perhaps his DEIRDRE would have surpassed the excellence he attained in RIDER'S TO THE SEA and THE WELL OF THE SAINTS.

Naisi, Deirdre's young lover, was represented as a youth filled with all the fire of vitality possible. He was endowed with manly virtue, physical courage, and the handsome features necessary for perfection as a suitor for the hand of the gifted Deirdre. This son of Unsa had nothing to offer her except his romantic love and the loyal devotion of himself and his two brothers, Ainnle and Ardan. Conchubor on the other hand, was portrayed in direct opposition to Naisi. He was old and ugly, but he had power as he was the King of Emain, and an almost paternal devotion to offer this lovely young girl he had raised from childhood. Under his guidance, Deirdre had been brought up on the wild hills of Slieve Fuadh. She was most beautiful and talented in every respect, but cared nothing for the honor of being Queen. Her preference was the wild life of the woods, with its open spaces and freedom. Lavarcham was characterized by her complete devotion to Deirdre who had been her charge since she was an infant. Even though she knew and warned the girl of the fate and doom which was to be hers if she had any

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[6]The Complete Works of J. M. Synge gives this line on p. 248 as, "and death should be a poor, untidy thing, though it's a queen that dies."

[7]Boyd, The Contemporary Drama of Ireland, p. 108.

contact with the sons of Unsa, she remained loyal to her mistress through everything. She tried to influence Deirdre in her decision, but knew it was a futile effort for the decree of the gods cannot be overcome by mortals. Fergus, Owen, and the other minor characters of the play were individualized only to the extent that they were readily recognized one from the other. Synge never spent much time in characterizing the ones who were put in for background purposes only. These people seemed to hold no interest for him whatsoever, but were there because they were necessary to the furtherance and carrying out of the plot. Combined, the two brothers of Naisi speak only twenty-one times during the entire three acts, and scarcely over one line at a time. The longest speech either of them has is the marriage ceremony.

> Ainnle (joining their hands). By the sun and moon and the whole earth, I wed Deirdre to Naisi. (He steps back and holds up his hands.) May the air bless you, and water and the wind, the sea, and all the hours of the sun and moon.[8]

With so very few characters as he used, it might have been expected that Synge would have gone into the inner minds of each one of them more thoroughly than he did.

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS was a tragedy from all angles. Mr. Corkery said that "strife or tension is not the secret of tragic drama, but the fact that strife or tension or disaster is where it ought not to be; for we are moved to pity by any other consideration."[9] Had the disaster not been quite so imminent from the start, perhaps Deirdre would have excited a feeling of

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[8]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 233.

[9]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 224.

pity, but the knowledge that a higher power was manipulating her "puppet strings" over which she herself had no control, was so great, pity could not be aroused. Almost every speech foreshadowed tragedy. She was helpless in the maelstrom of the web of fate.

The play had its first production at the Abbey Theatre on January 13, 1910, nine months after Synge's death. Sara Allgood, Arthur Sinclair, Marie O'Neill, and Fred O'Donovan played the leading parts. From the very first performance the Dublin audience realized this was a masterpiece of language, skill, characterization, and was indeed a worthy ending to Synge's career.

Deirdre, a talented young girl in Synge's version of the legend, was raised by Lavarcham under the guidance and supervision of Conchubor, the King of Emain, to become his queen when she was old enough to get married. When the play opened Deirdre had just reached maturity and Conchubor had come to make the necessary arrangements to take her back to the palace for their wedding. Instead of longing for the power and position she will have as the queen, Deirdre preferred the simple life like she had always led in the woods, communing with nature. The Fates have prophesied only grief for her future and death and destruction for the sons of Unsa if they have any contact whatsoever with her. During her wanderings this day, Deirdre has met Naisi and his brothers who are sons of Unsa. She and Naisi have found great love together. While Deirdre, who has pled unsuccessfully for one more year before going to Conchubor's palace for good as his queen, was preparing to leave for Emain, Naisi and his brothers sought shelter at her house. In spite of the protestations of Lavarcham, Naisi and Deirdre were married that night and went off to a life in the woods which could only turn out dis-

astrously for all concerned. Seven happy years passed before Conchubor sent a messenger to recall them to his palace. Both Naisi and Deirdre realized this could mean nothing but disaster for all concerned as Conchubor was sure to kill Naisi which, in turn, would make life unbearable for Deirdre, but they went with the messenger nonetheless. Naisi and his brothers were killed almost upon arrival. Conchubor had prepared a grave for the three brothers before they arrived, and as soon as Deirdre found out her husband was dead, she committed suicide in Naisi's still open grave. Conchubor's kingdom was destroyed by fire at the same time. The ending of the play was quiet as is the case in any truly great tragedy.

> Fergus. Four white bodies are laid down together; four clear lights are quenched in Ireland. (He throws his sword into the grave.) There is my sword that could not shield you--my four friends that were the dearest always. The flames of Emain have gone out: Deirdre is dead and there is none to keen her. That is the fate of Deirdre and the children of Unsa, and for this night, Conchubor, our war is ended.
>
> (He goes out.)
>
> Lavarcham. I have a little hut where you can rest, Conchubor; there is a great dew falling.
>
> Conchubor (with the voice of an old man). Take me with you. I'm hard set to see the way before me.
>
> Old Woman. This way, Conchubor.
>
> (They go out.)
>
> Lavarcham (beside the grave). Deirdre is dead, and Naisi is dead; and if the oaks and stars could die for sorrow, it's a dark sky and a hard naked earth we'd have this night in Emain.
>
> Curtain[10]

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[10]Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 267-68.

Some of the passages in this play contain beautiful poetic prose. The thought content is lovely. Take, for example, the part where Deirdre is moaning over the imminent separation by death of herself and Naisi. Synge builds up her grief bit by bit until she finally cries out in grief,

> . . . I see the flames of Emain starting upward in the dark night; and because of me there will be weasels and wild cats crying on a lonely wall where there were queens and armies and red gold, the way there will be a story told of a ruined city and a raving kind and a woman will be young forever. (She looks round.) I see the trees naked and bare, and the moon shining. Little moon, little moon of Alban, it's lonesome you'll be this night, and to-morrow night, and long nights after, and you pacing the woods beyond Glen Laoi, looking every place for Deirdre and Naisi, the two lovers who slept so sweetly with each other.[11]

Especially in the sentence beginning, "Little moon, little moon" there is that lyric quality to the prose which is so characteristic of Synge as a dramatist. The same feeling of poetic prose is evident in the following passages,

> Deirdre. It's you three will not see age or death coming--you that were my company when the fires on the hill-tops were put out and the stars were our friends only.[12]

> Deirdre (imperiously). I will not leave Naisi, who has left the whole world scorched and desolate. I will not go away where there is no light in the heavens, and no flower in the earth under them, but is saying to me that it is Naisi who is gone forever.[13]

Although he did not live long enough to complete and polish this play, Synge showed himself here to be a master of language and dramatic technique which other authors will find hard indeed to equal or surpass.

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[11] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 266.

[12] Ibid., p. 262.

[13] Ibid., p. 264.

SECTION IV

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

CHAPTER XI

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE

During his brief career as a dramatist, Synge tried his hand at the one, two, and three act forms of his medium. Both RIDER'S TO THE SEA and IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN were done to perfection in a single act, while THE TINKER'S WEDDING required two parts to complete it's idea. The other three, THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD, THE WELL OF THE SAINTS, and the unfinished DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS were full length productions. As a dramatist he seemed to have attained more success with the brief one act type than with the others, although THE WELL OF THE SAINTS remains a monument to his genius also. When Synge was definitely limited in scope and space he did a more thorough job of characterization, creating atmosphere, and perfecting the dialogue than when he had an abundance of time and space at his disposal. As Mr. Bourgeois has pointed out, "Synge, despite his care in technique, is more profoundly interested in the inner development of his characters than in the outer frame of action."[1] Plots were of mechanical concern to him to be used only as a means by which he could further the development of his peasants. Maurya was the personification of all sorrowing mothers of all generations, while Mary Doul was merely one blind old hag, but did not stand for the countless who have preceded and will follow her on this earth.

His treatment throughout his plays was sympathetic. This came from his complete understanding of the people and the problems he was portraying.

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[1]Bourgeois, John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 148

Synge had lived among his characters. This intimate contact with and knowledge of his subject was of untold aid to him as a dramatist. This is of the utmost importance to an author whose contributions to the theatre are going to live on after him and be recognized as having a definite influence on the work of future generations. Ibsen tried to create a living dialectic drama, but it has tended to become dated since his death. "Synge opposed reality to intellectualism: and herein lies the third definitive distinction of his dramatic achievment. . . . And to Synge was chiefly due the offset against Ibsenism of great romantic drama."[2] Synge felt drama must be real and of the people. He said,

> On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality.[3]

This is what he set out to do and what he succeeded in doing in most respects.

In the preface to THE TINKER'S WEDDING, Synge stated his ideas on drama and the technique of it as follows,

> The drama is made serious--in the French sense of the word--not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree on which our imaginations live. We should not go to the theatre as we go to a chemist's, or a dramshop, but as we go to a dinner, where the food we need is taken with pleasure and excitement. . . .
>
> The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything. . . .

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[2]Williams, Modern English Writers, p. 210.

[3]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 5.

> Of the things which nourish the imagination humour is one of the most needful, and it is dangerous to limit or destroy it. . . . and where a country loses its humour, as some towns in Ireland are doing, there will be a morbidity of mind, . . .
>
> In the greater part of Ireland, however, the whole people, from the tinkers to the clergy, have still a life, and view of life, that are rich and genial and humorous. I do not think that these country people, who have so much humour themselves, will mind being laughed at without malice, as the people in every country have been laughed at in their own comedies.[4]

One of the faults some critics have found with Synge as a dramatist was that his work was not didactic but, as he stated so definitely in the above preface, he did not intend for it to prove or teach anything. He felt the Irish people would understand his motives and aims better than they actually did. The riots which followed the opening of his PLAYBOY were a great sorrow to him as he saw then how misunderstood this effort of his had been by the public. Few people realized how deeply the controversy hurt him, or what a definite effect it would have on the remainder of his life. It was only a few weeks later he was taken sick and was ill from then until he died.

Synge's special talent which made him stand out so far above his colleagues was his powerful use of language. The Irish peasants spoke a mixture of Gaelic and English. This Gaelic influence made the English they spoke idiomatic and extremely difficult to reproduce as the exact inflection might make all the difference in the world. Synge said himself in reference to his use of the dialect,

> In writing THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD, as in my other plays I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the

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[4]Synge, The Complete Works, pp. 177-78.

> country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk-imagination of these fine people. Anyone who has lived with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe, or Dingle Bay. . . . [5]

he knew the native Gaelic language from his boyhood, but by the time he was grown, he had pretty well forgotten it. While he was on the Aran Islands, Synge studied and learned it all over again. His mind was always on the alert for unusual phraseology and idiomatic use of the language. In the short preface he wrote to THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD in 1907 he stated,

> When I was writing "The Shadow Of The Glen" some years ago, I got more aid than any learning could have given me from a chink in the floor of the old Wicklow house where I was staying, that let me hear what was being said by the servant girls in the kitchen.[6]

He went on to explain why he benefited from their conversation.

> This matter, I think, is of importance, for in countries where the imagination of the people, and the langugage they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive form.[7]

The poetical aspect of language was of primary importance to Synge. He based his diction

> . . . on a living peasant idiom, quaintly naive and archaic both in individual words and syntactical construction, but it is

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[5]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 4.

[6]Ibid., p. 4.

[7]Ibid., pp. 4-5.

elevated or sublimated above, though consistent with, this base, and has become (especially in the lyrical parts) an aristocratic dialect akin to the Elizabethan language of the English Bible.[8]

Synge's inherent love of music showed itself throughout the plays. He used a symphonic arrangement of his words to bring out their musical value, thus showing the background and careful study he had made of music before he turned to drama. Poetry is the closest linguistic expression for music so quite naturally Synge employed an underlying rhythm in his prose. "In a good play every speech should be as fully flavored as a nut or an apple, and such speeches cannot be written by anyone who works among people who have shut their lips on poetry.[9] He took the Irish peasant speech, added something of himself to it, and made it a thing which flows along easily and naturally, full of rich imagism. He used only images which were familiar to the people and, as Mr. Corkery pointed out, "his imagery is as concrete as that of the Bible: and only familiarity with the life dealt with enables a writer, nay forces a writer, to allow the subject so to declare itself."[10] Not many dramatists of his period cared about the rhythmic quality of their dialogue. Synge's plays , while not actually written in blank verse, show certain characteristics of it nevertheless. The Irish people's literature had been to a greater degree, ballads, folk-songs, and tales which were told to each succeeding generation. It was no wonder, then, that the plays about these peasants should contain blank verse qualities. This poetic prose which

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[8]Bourgeois, John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 216.

[9]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 5.

[10]Corkery, Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 91.

Synge created as a way of expressing his feelings was strong and powerful, with a worthwhile substance to it. He used a long, meditative cadence which exactly suited his technique. Synge created this style so he could express with more accuracy of reproduction just what was in the minds of the characters about whom he was writing as he saw them than could ever have been rendered by merely setting down so many words in the English of England.

> If he did not write his plays in verse, it is simply because he felt that peasants prose had that flavor of reality and raciness which was so dear to him. Yet his prose, without ever being sustainedly iambic, contains occasional lines of blank verse--about eighty in the PLAYBOY and ten at least in DEIRDRE; and it should be remembered that towards the end of his life Synge tried to invent a new blank-verse form in dialect.[11]

The style of Synge is very easily recognized. It flows along with a rapidity which makes it individual. Authors found it one which was easy to copy and in the Irish movement a whole school of young dramatists sprung up who wrote in a Syngesse manner. His diction, language, and method of presentation became familiar to all the Abbey writers, but none of these imitators could ever quite equal him. Synge's works did not show signs of a forced passage nor did any of his plays seem to be the result of some extremely hard effort. Only in the mechanical part of the plot of THE TINKER'S WEDDING did Synge give the impression of having worked on it in an especial effort to make the story come out as he wanted it to. This play was the least like him in this respect as his plots usually seemed to take care of themselves without his help. For this reason, perhaps, it is the weakest of the six.

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[11]Bourgeois, John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 230.

> The plays are bound together, and separated from all others, by something less than their distinctive language; they are the work not only of one hand, but one soul. The moods of his various plays--laughter and passion and knavery--were what he saw in the world; but the light in which he saw them was his own, a clear hard light, shining neither through rosy nor through smoky glass.[12]

There was an elusive quality to his style which differentiated it from the work of all other men and made him a truly great dramatist.

John Synge has treated his characters as individuals, yet almost all of them follow a type pattern. They are not only typical of the peasants, but they are typical of that certain kind of person found only on the Aran Islands or in the backward counties of Ireland. Yeats has commented,

> Men of letters have sometimes said that the characters of a romance or of a play must be typical. They mean the characters must be typical of something which exists in all men because the writer has found it in his own mind. . . . All that a dramatic writer need do is to persuade us, during the two hours' traffic of the stage, that the events of his play did really happen. He must know enough of the life of his own country, or of history, to create this illusion, . . .[13]

Maurya, Nora, Martin Doul, Christy, even Deirdre, and the rest are all presented against the simplest background possible. This left the audience undistracted by scenery and such so the concentration might be entirely on the characterization and dialogue which he was trying to present. Synge did this not only because it saved expense for the theatre which was an important item for the Abbey Players, but also because he was trying to do as Shakespeare had done; to create his atmosphere by the dialogue and through the characters themselves rather than by an artificial means. Each of his central figures represented some abstract quality. The Playboy showed the

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[12]Bickley, John Synge and the Irish Dramatic Movement, p. 30.

[13]Yeats, Plays and Controversies, pp. 91-92.

harm which could be brought about by too much fame; Maurya and Deirdre expressed the sorrows of mankind; and the Douls, the effects of disillusionment. In each play he has made a study of the inner workings of the main character's mind, and has added whatever other people were necessary in the background to bring out the interesting qualities in that figure's make-up. He used his genius well but carefully.

In IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN Synge worked as an apprentice dramatist, but by the time he wrote his second play, RIDER'S TO THE SEA, he had perfected his dramatic technique and was ready to take his place as one of the masters of it.

CHAPTER XII

CONCLUSION

Looking at John Millington Synge's dramatic work as a whole, the outstanding characteristics of it are the language, the characterization, the human sympathy and understanding depicted in the plays, and the expression of Synge's own philosphy of life which constantly shows itself. His style is individual, and the results of the two major interests in Synge's life, that is his love of music and the beauty of nature, combine to form a poetic prose which will long be remembered for its intrinsic value.

One of Synge's chief aims in the plays is to emphasize the philosophical attitude of the peasant classes of Ireland when they come in contact with adversity. Maurya exemplifies this attitude in the quiet which comes over her when she says, rising triumphantly above her anguish,

> They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me. . . . I'll have no call now to be up crying and praying when the wind breaks from the south, and you can hear the surf is in the east, and the surf is in the west, making a great stir with the two noises, and they hitting one on the other. I'll have no call now to be going down and getting Holy Water in the dark nights after Samhain, and I won't care what way the sea is when the other women will be keening. . . .[1]

This same attitude showing the ultimate survival of the spirit, no matter how difficult the test, is also brought out when Mary Doul who has suffered the pangs of disillusionment, turns to her blind husband and says,

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[1] Synge, The Complete Works, p. 96.

> . . . (laughing cheerfully). Well, we're a great pair, surely and it's great times we'll have yet, maybe, and great talking before we die.[2]

Mr. Bourgeois points out that there were three separate and distinct influences on Synge's work which he designates as the foreign element, the personal element, and finally the Irish one. He says that

> The foreign element europeanized or universalized Synge's Irish subjects and his treatment of them. The Irish element, in return, defined and concentrated his international culture, which otherwise might have blurred his vision. The personal element gave richness, death and intensity to his blending of Continental art with Irish observation. It is by far the most important element of the three . . .[3]

These three factors completed the pattern of Synge's life and therefore show clearly how the circumstances of his life influenced his work. Without his travel experiences he could never have looked at Irish subjects as impersonally or with such a broad mine as he did. Yet his upbringing and background in Ireland gave him power to understand things sympathetically from the Irishman's point of view. DEIRDRE could never have been written with such sincerity and depth of feeling had Synge been in robust health. Synge understood the problem of facing death with courage and compassion; therefore he could write of it with conviction.

The language Synge uses in his dramatic works is an Anglicized Gaelic. He has taken the peasant patois and put it into an English form, trying to keep the idiomatic twist of phraseology as close as translation into another language will allow. The Playboy killed his father "Tuesday was a week."

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[2]Synge, The Complete Works, p. 161.

[3]Bourgeois, John M. Synge and the Irish Theatre, p. 239.

This is not the way an Englishman would put the phrase "a week ago Tuesday", yet it becomes charming in English, Synge's way of saying it. Yeats said Synge "loves all that has an edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy"[4] and this is certainly true of "Tuesday was a week." This phrase has an edge to it. It is full of a new vitality, and is fresh to the ear. Many authors have tried, and successfully tried, to copy his style. This has been a fairly easy task as "the same words, phrases, and turns of sentences occur again and again . . . and there are certain forms of rhythm about Synge's prose which are used with equal frequency, and are quick and easy to catch."[5] Synge was writing of a life he knew and loved. Because of this first hand knowledge of his material, he was able to capture the mood of the people in his style. Although both the public and the press of Ireland were definitely hostile to Synge during his brief six years from 1903 to 1909 as a dramatist, since his death his style and the subject matter of the plays have been recognized for their true greatness.

Some few of the forty-two characters this author created are so human and true to life that they seem absolutely real, rather than merely imaginary beings. Nora was untrue to her husband, but he turned the tables on her and outwitted her by pretending to be dead. These two people live and breathe in their cunning. Cleverness such as this is to be admired in any-

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[4] Barrett H. Clark, Representative One Act Plays By British and Irish Authors, Boston, Little Brown Company, 1921, p. 391.

[5] Cohen, One Act Plays By Modern Authors, p. xxxv-vi.

one. Mary Byrne was also clever in her drunken reasoning about the tin can versus the draught of porter. She was not to be cheated out of what she considers to be her just dues! Christy Mahon was equally real. All the young girls were telling him how wonderful he was, so quite naturally he gloried in his new found fame and wished to retain it at any cost. Synge made his Deirdre so natural, she seemed about the most real of all the characters who stand as silent testimony to his genius. This girl was faced with the problem of taking either permanent fame and glory as the queen of her country, or marrying the man she loved with a deep and undying love when both she and Naisi knew this union could bring nothing but heartbreak and disaster to any of the ones concerned. Her decision to go with her lover and suffer the consequences was the natural one. She did not waiver from it at all. Although most of Synge's characters speak the same dialogue, this cannot be considered as too big a fault because, with the exception of the ones in DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS, all the people he wrote about were of approximately the same stratum of society and, even though they lived in different parts of Ireland, in order to give his work a national aspect Synge had to create a dialogue which would be characteristic of all Irish peasants. His whole concern was to make his people appear as near like living beings as possible, and he used his own distinctive poetic prose medium to accomplish this.

> . . . Synge is the one writer since the Elizabethan age of England who has written great romantic drama . . . In verse Synge had no power; his prose plays are in their conception of life transfigured by poetry; and the style he made unto himself has a cadence and rhythm which communicates all the pleasures of metre. . . The writer has raised action and prose-narrative to the plan of poetry and imbued the story of rough and homespun lives with a universal symbolism; . . .[6]

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[6]Williams, Modern English Writers, p. 216.

While he was connected with the Abbey Theatre, Synge did all his work as a dramatist. Those six years were full ones for him as he not only wrote his plays, but helped direct them as well. He read a great many of the manuscripts which came in and thus was influencial in establishing the policies of the theatre. Synge's work, though not large in bulk, was certainly of the highest quality in every way. Mr. Corkery says of him in summing up his dramatic career, "we understand therefore the warmth that is in his work. That warmth comes only into the work of a writer for whom both place and people are the one unthinkable except in terms of the other, for he experiences reality."[7] Synge tried to make the Irish people forget the monotony of their daily lives through his comedies and to enlarge their spirits with the tragedies. The plays are unified in mood and thought. During his brief connection with the Abbey Players Synge rose in those few years from an unknown author to take his place as one of the great dramatists of his own time and one whose reputation will not diminish with the years. In his work he combined new and unexpected style with a poetic concept, a dramatic visualization, and a desire to bring reality into drama above everything.

> Like all who truly express themselves, as he expressed his country he expressed mankind; but being a certain type of Irishman, and a certain type of man, he expressed Ireland and mankind only as he saw them, or saw himself in them. His plays are Ireland; they are mankind; above all, they are Synge.[8]

The work of John Millington Synge as a dramatist was limited by the small number of plays he had time to write, and by the limited locality he

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[7] Corkery, Synge and the Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 236.

[8] Bourgeois, John M. Synge and The Irish Theatre, p. 247.

drew upon for material and subject matter, but he perfected a style, dialect, and method of characterization which remains a distinguished contribution to English dramatic literature. He will be remembered for his connection with the Abbey Theatre Players, his few bits of prose which are worthwhile, a handful of poems, but above all, he was first and foremost a dramatist.

SECTION V

ABSTRACT

ABSTRACT

Just before the turn of the twentieth century, there were several movements afoot in Ireland to create a National literature. Soon after the founding of several literary societies, one was formed which concerned itself mainly with the drama. Yeats and Lady Augustus Gregory were the chief instigators of this and soon found themselves with a small group of people around them who were interested in this same thing. They formed a little theatrical company of their own, and put on simple, unelaborate productions. John Millington Synge, a protegee of Yeats, became interested in the group, left his work in Paris, and went to the Aran Islands to study the people and their customs. These visits to the Islands later formed the nucleus of his work as a dramatist.

The Abbey Theatre was founded by Miss A. E. Horniman. She had seen Mr. Yeats' THE KING'S THRESHOLD performed by the players of the above mentioned theatrical group, and was very much interested in the Company. Realizing their great need for a theatre, she gave them what then became the Abbey Theatre rent free for six years. The Fay brothers were the managers of it until shortly after the production of THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD.

Synge, born in 1871 near Dublin, was the son of a barrister, John Hatch Synge, who died when the dramatist was less than two years old. In 1892 he was graduated from the University of Dublin, afterwards going to Germany to study music. A year or so later he went to Paris where he tried without success to be a critic of French literature. Yeats persuaded him to leave all this and go to the Aran Islands to study the peasant life there. Synge was not a strong man, and died of Cancer in 1909, after he had written six

plays, a few verses, and essays.

Since Synge was in poor health all his life, he could not take part in normal activities. This forced him to find pleasure in books, and in things of nature which developed his keen insight into the little things which were to play such a large part in his writings later on. He loved music which may partly account for the rhythmic quality of his prose. Synge's European travel gave him a broad viewpoint which influenced his entire dramatic career. During his wanderings around the Aran Islands he gathered the material for his plots and characters. Thus the circumstances of his life were directly influential on his work.

The six plays are each treated separately in respect to style, language, characterization, form, and the sources along with the folk-lore involved in them.

IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN exemplifies Synge's technique in handling an old folktale and modernizing it. In fact he brought it so much up to date that it caused a great deal of criticism. The clever old husband thought up a way in which to catch his unfaithful wife by pretending to be dead. Stylistically, this play was not as good as some of those which he wrote later. With the ending of IN THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN Synge finished his apprenticeship as a dramatist and was fully prepared to write his masterpieces.

RIDER'S TO THE SEA was Synge's best one act play and is considered technically one of the best of this form ever done. Maurya, an old woman who has suffered cruelly from the wrath of the sea, became the abstract expression for all sorrowing mothers of the world. The characterization of this peasant fisher wife is deep and complete. Synge's prose in this play

is excellent and has the qualities in it which made him famous.

In THE WELL OF THE SAINTS Synge tried his hand for the first time at a full length play. Here, through the two pitiful old blind people Synge brings out his ideas on the uncertainty and disillusionment of life. The characters come through and are truly worthy of having been created by a master such as Synge.

The two-act THE TINKER'S WEDDING is a comedy revolving around a tin can and a marriage. This seems to be the least successful of the plays as regards style, characterization, and plot. Two tinkers have been living together for many years without being married and suddenly decide to have the priest marry them. They do not have enough money, but he agrees to do it for ten shillings and a tin can. The can is taken by the man's mother and traded for porter, so there can be no ceremony.

Synge's THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD created quite a sensation when it was produced in Ireland, as people felt it was unfair to the Irish and that the language in it was indecent. At the opening performances everywhere there was trouble from the audience. The central character, Christy, was done with deep thought and understanding. The author created a situation which was human and the treatment is excellent.

DEIRDRE OF THE SORROWS is an exquisite study of the problems and philosophy of life as opposed to death. Deirdre has to decide between life with power and riches but without love, or entering a marriage which everyone knows will bring only disaster to all concerned. The style shows Synge's powers to the fullest as a dramatist and is a perfect example of his poetic-prose dialogue.

As a dramatist, Synge perfected himself in technique with his first play. He wrote on a limited subject in a limited way, thus enabling himself to perfect his style and method of characterization completely in a short time. Synge invented his own unique dialect for his peasant characters, and added a rhythmic quality which makes his work original. The language is delightful and the poetic aspect of it makes Synge's work easy to read.

Looking at John Millington Synge's dramatic work as a whole, the outstanding characteristics of it are the language, the characterization, the human sympathy and ~~the~~ understanding depicted in the plays, and the expression of Synge's own philosophy of life which constantly shows itself. His style is individual, and the results of the two major interests in Synge's life, music and his love of nature, combine to form a poetic prose which will long be remembered for its intrinsic value.

SECTION VI

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